

Peru Free Trade Agreement is disaster for farmers everywhere



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MinutemanMedia.org

Published Friday, December 07, 2007

American anxiety about our food system is at an all-time high. With every report of tainted or poisonous foreign food imports or new E. coli recall, consumer demand grows for locally produced, source-verified products. As a family farmer who grows collard greens, okra, watermelon, and squash and has struggled for years trying to obtain a fair price for my crops, I welcome wholeheartedly this phenomenon. However, our Congress members seem to be oblivious to the livelihoods of family farmers and the wishes of consumers as they continue to pass more disastrous free trade agreements. Instead of learning from the failed lessons of the National American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the House of Representatives passed the Peru Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in November. The U.S. Senate is looking to vote on it this month. Farmers and consumers both here and in Peru will be the big losers. The only winners will be corporate agribusinesses dumping cheap grain and seeking the cheapest labor and most lax environmental standards.

As a family farmer from Mississippi, I actually thought NAFTA might be able to help farmers like me access new markets. But I quickly found out how wrong I was when many of the farmers in my cooperative lost our cucumber contracts from corporations such as Heinz and Vlasic, who chose to buy instead from Mexico. The Peru FTA simply continues this failed NAFTA-model for agriculture that destroys local food systems both here and abroad, while favoring industrial-style, environmentally damaging farm systems. The United States has historically had an agricultural trade surplus. We are now verging on becoming a net food importer and already have a \$400 million agriculture trade deficit with Peru. Now is not the time to allow more cheap foreign food that would undercut American family farmers and ranchers and jeopardizes our food security. Since the World Trade Organization (WTO) and NAFTA went into effect, the United States has lost more than a quarter million independent family farms. Already, the asparagus industries in California and Washington have been devastated by the flood of cheap imports from Peru. Processing companies such as Del Monte and Green Giant have shifted their production to Peru to take advantage of lower farmland, labor, and environmental compliance costs. American ranchers will be harmed by the Peru FTA's failure to include food safety standards for cattle. Peru's beef production is growing and could soon export to the United States, despite a foot-and-mouth disease problem. Our family farmers in the South are increasingly losing out to cheap imports from Central and Latin America. Soon, you won't be able to find any local produce at your supermarket or restaurants if we continue passing more free trade agreements!

As harmful as the Peru FTA will be for American farmers and ranchers, the effects on Peruvian farmers will be just as devastating. As an African American farmer, I am particularly concerned about the impact the agreement will have on the millions of Afro-Peruvian and indigenous farmers. The same international grain traders who dumped below-cost grain into Mexico after NAFTA, driving over a million farmers off the land and fueling illegal migration into the United States, will now do the same in Peru. Many of those displaced Peruvian corn and rice farmers facing economic catastrophe will be forced to migrate or grow illicit drug crops to survive. In July, four million Peruvians took to the streets to voice opposition to the FTA.

Farmers at home and abroad need a new direction on trade and agriculture policy that protects rural livelihoods and promotes food sovereignty. The first step in that new direction must be rejection of the Peru Free Trade Agreement and the upcoming agreements with South Korea, Panama and Colombia. Family farmers want to produce for our families and our local communities, not export markets. Free trade directly undermines and weakens renewed consumer demand for local and healthy foods. We have already outsourced our energy security. Why are we doing the same with our food security? Food sovereignty, not free trade, needs to be the foundational basis of our policies if we are to build a more healthful and just food system.

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