

Pro-CAFTA Humane Society Has Sister Groups Fuming

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Best known for its pet shelters and crusades against animal abuse, the Humane Society is hardly the sort of organization that might be expected to throw its weight behind an international trade pact.

So when a top Humane Society official delivered testimony favoring the proposed U.S.-Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) at a Senate hearing a few days ago, opponents of the accord were stunned. The remarks by Patricia Forkan, president of Humane Society International, were in marked contrast with the denunciations of CAFTA by other major environmental groups. Based on her organization's work in Central America, Forkan declared, the agreement was likely to prove environmentally beneficial.

It was a defection from the green ranks that anti-CAFTA forces could not leave unchallenged -- and now, they are striking back at the Humane Society for its apostasy, accusing the group of selling out to the Bush administration for government largess.

A letter sent yesterday by 14 Democratic members of Congress attributes the Humane Society's position on CAFTA to a \$500,000 grant the organization received in October 2003 from the U.S. Agency for International Development to do work in Central America. Led by Rep. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), the signers, who plan to release the letter publicly today, point out that, before receiving the grant, the Humane Society "was a strong opponent of Congressional passage of all major trade legislation over the past decade," including the North American Free Trade Agreement and the establishment of permanent normal trade relations with China. The letter also alleges that the Humane Society illegally used some of its grant money to lobby in favor of CAFTA, and it asks the Government Accountability Office to investigate.

To the Humane Society's critics, the organization's pro-CAFTA activities are the latest in a series of revelations about how the administration has used government money to secure support. Other highly publicized cases involve broadcaster Armstrong Williams, who acknowledged that he touted the administration's education agenda after receiving \$240,000 from the Education Department, and video "news" reports that were distributed for broadcast by government agencies including the Department of Health and Human Services.

"In addition to being troubling, such propaganda and lobbying campaigns are illegal," states the Democratic lawmakers' letter, adding: "Congress and the American people deserve a full accounting for the uses [by the Humane Society] of these taxpayer funds."

All of which the Humane Society dismisses as a load of trumped-up charges aimed at deflecting attention from the striking fact that a legitimate environmental group has recognized the virtues of a trade deal.

"They want to cast aspersions so they can eliminate any possible support for this treaty," Forkan said. "Because how else can they explain us?"

Environmental activists generally battle against trade agreements such as CAFTA on the grounds that the deals encourage multinational corporations to build factories in countries with poor regulation over pollution and environmental degradation. Free traders counter that the pacts can lead to improved environmental standards in developing nations, in part by generating a growing middle class and in part by fostering cooperation between local authorities and environmentally conscious groups in countries like the United States.

On this much, both sides agree: The Humane Society has departed in a significant way from its previous stance as a member in good standing of the coalition against big trade deals. In her Senate testimony, Forkan recalled the tumultuous protests in 1999 when "I was on the streets of Seattle with hundreds of folks in turtle suits, which the Humane Society created, protesting the overreaching, at least in my opinion, of the World Trade Organization into U.S. environmental and animal protection laws." She added, "I have never been accused of being a 'free trader' or a 'globalization supporter.' "

The process that turned the organization's views around, she said, began when Humane Society International, the overseas affiliate of the Humane Society of the United States, volunteered in late 2002 to join a "capacity-building committee" sponsored by the office of then-U.S. Trade Representative Robert B. Zoellick. The panel was aimed at helping Central American countries address environmental, habitat and animal protection needs in anticipation of CAFTA.

"When you're offered a seat at the table, as Ambassador Zoellick did, it didn't make any sense to not at least try to improve the situation," Forkan said.

That led to the USAID grant, which pays for a variety of activities in Central America including rescue centers for endangered animals such as howler monkeys and macaws that customs agents find in smuggled shipments, and an organic-cacao-growing project aimed at producing habitats that protect migratory birds. The whole experience, Forkan said, opened her eyes to ways in which Central Americans were interested in saving their environment rather than despoiling it.

"In our meetings with [non-governmental organizations] in Central America and our meetings with government officials in Central America and businesses, they are genuinely, desperately wanting to improve their countries," she said. "It comes across loud and clear."

That account doesn't impress the Humane Society's critics, who contend the \$500,000 must have played a key role in the organization's thinking. Although Forkan noted that

much of the grant was disbursed to Central American groups, and the amount "is not a large amount of money for our organization" given the \$70 million-plus budget of the Humane Society of the United States, the organization's Web site indicates that Humane Society International, the affiliate headed by Forkan, had a budget of only \$1.7 million in 2003. (It has gone up to \$5 million this year, according to Forkan.)

"The reason why the Humane Society's sudden change of heart raises questions is because CAFTA . . . contains not only every anti-environmental, anti-animal provision that led them to oppose NAFTA, the WTO, etc., but has some additional provisions" that environmentalists find objectionable, said Lori Wallach, director of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch, a staunch CAFTA foe. Forkan disagrees, arguing that the pact's environmental clauses are "far reaching and innovative."

As for the allegation that federal grant money was used for lobbying, which is based on a pro-CAFTA letter sent to the Bush administration by a Humane Society official in Costa Rica, the organization's officials maintain that no impropriety was involved. Only half of the official's salary is covered by the USAID grant, so "the letter he wrote was obviously on the [other] 50 percent of his time" that is paid by Humane Society International, said Marta Prado, a lawyer for the organization.

Forkan, who admitted to being taken aback by the Democratic lawmakers' letter, said such accusations are further evidence that CAFTA opponents "are trying to find a way to attack any group saying anything positive."