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U.S. Agricultural Trade Policy – Better to Give Than Receive

GRASS RANGE, MONT. – In the midst of this holiday season, U.S. trade negotiators are gift wrapping domestic agricultural markets for corporate agribusiness.

The U.S. Trade Representative is finishing negotiations on the Australia Free Trade Agreement (FTA Australia). The bilateral agreement seeks to allow unlimited imports of agricultural products from Australia.

WORC spokesperson, Gilles Stockton, a rancher from Grass Range, Mont., said the agreement would harm U.S. livestock producers.

“FTA Australia would flood U.S. markets with Australian agricultural products that are already grown in this country,” Stockton said. “But, there is no market for U.S. beef or other food crops in Australia.”

The U.S. is already the largest market for Australian beef exports. Over one-third of U.S. beef imports comes from Australia. Beef production costs are about half the cost of U.S. production, thanks to a generous feed grain subsidy from the Australian government.

“If this agreement goes through, it would depress agricultural commodity prices paid to our ranchers and farmers and hurt the economies of rural communities,” he said. “The primary beneficiaries would be the giant agribusiness corporations as they pit U.S. producers against Australian producers.”

On December 6, WORC’s board of directors passed a resolution against the FTA Australia. WORC supports a trade policy that strengthens the health, environment, food sovereignty, working conditions, and labor rights of all countries, according to the resolution. The resolution is based on WORC’s Trade Bill of Rights, a set of guiding principles for fair trade policies.

Congress is expected to make a decision on the agreement in early 2004. Congress is unable to alter the agreement and must accept or reject it in whole.

Stockton urged livestock producers to contact their elected representatives in Washington. “Congress should reject this agreement because of its harmful impacts on American family farmers and ranchers,” he said.

WORC is a network of grassroots organizations from seven states that include 8,250 members and 48 local community groups. WORC helps its member groups succeed by providing training and by coordinating regional issue campaigns. Members are farmers, ranchers, and consumers.