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Sent: Sunday, December 27, 2009 12:47 PM
To: ATR-Agricultural Workshops <agriculturalworkshops@usdoj.gov>
Subject: Comment
Attach: Agriculture & Antitrust Comment.doc

To Whom It May Concern --

First off, thank you for soliciting this input. I am heartened to hear my government asking these important questions of itself and of its citizens. I will be enormously proud if it marks the first step toward the major change that our nation's food system -- and every one of us who eats from it -- so desperately needs.

I work in public health, overseeing the operations of a non-profit that connects low-income families visiting pediatric clinics with the non-medical resources -- things like stable housing, healthy food, safe childcare, etc. -- that have been proven to be critical to their children's healthy development. My reflections on the question of corporate consolidation in the food industry are grounded in my professional as well as my personal experience.

As far as I can tell, the profit structure of large food and agriculture corporations is entirely misaligned with everything we know and aspire to in terms of our country's health. Highly processed food products -- which all the research has shown are nearly always worse for us than the straight-up foods they're made from -- have a longer shelf life and a higher profit margin than fresh foods, so food corporations have strong incentives to process the heck out of anything they grow. What fresh foods we do see in our supermarkets have been engineered more for easy transport than for nutritional value, and they're still far too expensive -- particularly in comparison to the processed food products out there -- to be a worthwhile investment to families on constrained budgets. And the fact that major corporations maintain control over all levels of food processing makes it ever more difficult for independent farmers to bring healthier, less processed, real food to markets.

Also on the health front: it makes my blood boil that my tax dollars subsidize the outrageous over-production of corn that becomes the corn syrup and myriad other corn products that are directly responsible for our obesity crisis -- a crisis that, in turn, is requiring even more of my tax dollars to address. Obesity is not the result of kids watching too much TV. It's not about a decline in personal responsibility. It is about the food that's available and marketed to us. A tax on soda -- or any of these products -- won't fix it. It won't even particularly help. As long as soda is the cheapest beverage out there -- which it will be until we stop subsidizing the raw materials, no matter how aggressively we tax the end product -- people will continue to overconsume it, as they will all the other not-quite-food products that our food corporations put on our shelves.

Additionally, while I don't consider myself a particularly ardent environmentalist, I think we can all agree that we need to do something, soon, about climate change. The average American meal travels about 1,500 miles from farm to plate, leaving behind an enormous carbon footprint. This seems like an inevitable byproduct of corporate concentration: large corporations will always want to centralize production to create economies of scale. While I can see real benefits to that kind of centralization in some sectors of the economy, transporting lettuce or milk or chicken such vast distances seems nonsensical. If locally-sourced food is better for our health AND reduces our carbon emissions (not to mention improving the health of our local economies), why aren't we promoting it as aggressively as possible?

In short, we've built ourselves a food system that not only doesn't nourish us very well but actually makes us sick -- one that not only doesn't promote strong communities and environmental stewardship as good growing practices can but actually does harm to both.

I want America to do better. I think we can. The food system, as currently structured, is one of those rare cases in which the injustice runs counter to the interests of the entire American population, not just those of a disadvantaged minority (though the poor are certainly the miner's canary here). It's also, as a result, one in which a rising tide could actually raise all boats. I urge the Department to take action to address it, and I will look forward to following the hearings in the coming year.

Sutton Kiplinger.

PS: This comment is also attached in Word format. Thanks!