

## Agriculture by Marcia Merry

### Food cartel boosts fast track

*The House Agriculture Committee held hearings to promote a new "Rockefeller task force" for free trade.*

If there were a political version of *Ripley's Believe It Or Not*, the April 24 House Agriculture Committee hearing on the North American Free Trade Agreement fast track proposal qualifies for entry.

The gala, day-long event featured the announcement that 46 "farm groups" have formed a new "Task Force on the North American Free Trade Agreement," to lobby Congress to sign onto fast track approval of NAFTA. In turn, Agriculture Secretary Edward Madigan used the group of 46, and 5 additional signers, to testify that "51 agriculture groups have supported the fast track and that's good enough for me." Madigan was joined by a panel of other Bush cabinet members, including Trade Representative Carla Hills, Labor Secretary Lynn Martin, and EPA representative Lyn Fisher. Two reports were released by the Government Accounting Office.

After questions to the panel, a select list of over 25 witnesses voiced support for fast track. Only two witnesses criticized the policy, leaving foreign media to wonder how they could give a fair presentation of both sides of the issue, when the Bush people controlled the debate.

The affair was so stage-managed, that the next day Agriculture Committee Chairman Kika de la Garza (D-Tex.) could issue only a mealy-mouthed press release, headlined ambiguously: "De la Garza Pledges to Closely Monitor U.S.-Mexico FTA Negotiations." De la Garza said, "I believe safeguards and other protections can be written into a free trade agreement that won't lessen our com-

mitment to our farmers, the environment, and other American interests." But he allowed no facts to come forward on the farm and food crisis.

Over the 1980s, free trade has so impoverished Mexico that per capita consumption of the staples corn and beans has dropped by 25%. One-third of Mexico's 85 million people are suffering malnourishment. Meantime, Mexican fruits, vegetables and beef are being drawn into the U.S. by cartel brokers, who are ruining U.S. farmers.

Who are the 46 influential "farm leaders" on the new pro-fast track task force? The list is a catalogue of the same food cartel companies whose domination of world food trade is ruining farming. In alphabetical order, they include: Archer Daniels Midland, Cargill, ConAgra, Continental Grain Co., Louis Dreyfus Corp. In addition, there are a group of farm membership organizations being led around by the nose by the cartel companies, including: National Corn Growers Association, National Pork Producers Council, National Cattlemen's Association, National Barley Growers Association, Rice Growers Association of California.

To add "star appeal," the task force has six former secretaries of agriculture: John R. Block, who testified, Richard E. Lyng, Orville L. Freeman, Clifford M. Hardin, Earl L. Butz, and Bob Bergland.

The task force was created by the Washington-based policy group called "The Citizens Network for Foreign Affairs," whose board of directors sports David Rockefeller of Chase Manhattan Bank, Dwayne An-

dreas of Archer Daniels Midland, and AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland. Among the "honorary advisers" sits "Fat" Henry Kissinger; and the group's co-chairmen are Henry H. Fowler and Melvin Laird, former government officials, representing the true interests of this outfit: to impose new ways to underpay farmers and labor, and back up private debt holdings.

The controlled environment in the committee nearly blew when one critical witness, Craig Merrilees, referred to the task force as representing David Rockefeller and Cargill. Merrilees was speaking on behalf of the National Toxics Campaign and Fair Trade Campaign, which oppose both NAFTA and GATT. Rep. Tom Coleman (R-Mo.), point-man for Bush on the Ag Committee, flew into a personal attack, saying Merrilees didn't represent farmers, and praised the task force.

In an attempt to put a lid on the ugly facts coming out about the social collapse caused by "free trade," Carla Hills and her cohorts declared out of order any congressional expressions of concern, by asserting that the hearing was about "process," and not about "substance." Ambassador Hills continued her spin-doctoring, declaring that NAFTA is a "win-win" situation, and the fast track is essential. USDA's Madigan repeatedly intoned, "Fifty-one agriculture groups have supported the fast track. . . ." Labor Secretary Martin swore that the overall economy will grow under NAFTA.

In this mad hatter's environment, the Florida Secretary of Agriculture Bob Crawford, representing fruit and vegetable growers, and a spokesman for the California avocado producers did not have the nerve to oppose NAFTA outright, but merely to ask for exemptions and safeguards for their constituents.