

## **Tilth's Comments for the Listening Session of the US Trade Representative**

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**Washington Tilth**  
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**Introduction: WTO and the Road to Seattle** (From the *Washington Tilth* front page, not included in the comment submitted)

The World Trade Organization will be holding its third Ministerial Meeting in Seattle November 29th through December 3. Many grass roots activities are being planned, including entertainment and demonstrations to draw attention to what many feel are inequities and downright wrong-headedness in many of the proposals which will be considered. In Seattle, there will be a special Food and Agriculture Day on December 2nd to promote sustainable and ecologically sound agriculture to the public and to the media during the WTO meetings.

Many issues of special concern to small farmers will come to the fore in these meetings. For example, because of increased concentration in the world's agricultural equipment, processing and distribution systems, [see '[Corporate Clusters' Harm Farmers and Consumers, Washington Tilth, Spring 1999](#)] there has been mounting pressure for anti-trust legislation. The WTO would be the logical home for such rules, but few governments make it a priority. In fact the controlling agency on food safety is heavily lobbied by those very corporate interests making action in this regard unlikely.

This lobby is also seeking to prohibit a country's "right to know" through labeling what we know about the food we eat. These labeling prohibitions include providing information regarding products which meet a higher social standard — like ecological soundness, fair wages, and safe working conditions— as well as whether the product contains foreign substances or is the result of biotechnological processes. There are also rules pending which would prohibit governments from 'subsidizing' local and sustainable producers by giving them preferential treatment in government purchasing.

On the other hand, there are also proposals pending which would alter the rules to permit countries to protect local biodiversity and indigenous producers (while the corporate interests are promoting monoculture, killer seeds and large-scale agriculture.)

Additionally, the US and other governments are proposing new rules which would prohibit banning the patenting of life forms (as is currently the case in Europe among others.). The US, as part of the re-negotiations of the Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) provisions of the WTO, is moving to require all nations to enact western-style patent laws for plants and animals, thus giving undue economic benefit to the holder of patents and reducing the options for biodiversity and third world self-sufficiency.

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### **Tilth's Comments:**

Thank you for this opportunity to express some concerns regarding the upcoming WTO Agriculture negotiations. Celebrating our 25th year, Washington Tilth Producers is the

organization working on behalf of farmers practicing organic and sustainable agriculture in Washington State. We have approximately 400 grower members in every part of the state and every crop grown in the Northwest is represented with our membership. Tilth Producers is a member of the multi-state Western Sustainable Agriculture Working Group. We also work with the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture which brings together groups from all walks of life throughout the United States to address issues of food and fiber production and promotes an agriculture based on principles of ecological soundness, economic viability and social justice.

We have many concerns with current and proposed World Trade Organization rules that will further liberalize the rules that govern international trade. There is growing evidence that the Uruguay Round has led to decreased food security in poor nations, as well as increased environmental damage as a result of industrialized agricultural methods displacing indigenous methods. Certainly, people are being displaced in poor rural countries as local economies and crops are replaced by an export—oriented agriculture promoted by industrialized countries. This leads directly to political instability and starvation.

There are many social, environmental and economic factors that are not being considered as governments and corporations debate in closed rooms how international trade policy will govern a country's sovereign right to control its own food policy. There are even serious concerns in the US with our own ability to maintain a decentralized food supply. All countries appropriately share the long-held desire to defend and maintain their own food security. It is not appropriate to put the fate of the world food supply into the hands of a limited number of multinational food and technology conglomerates.

The indices currently used to measure globalizations's costs and benefits to society have not yet begun to truly account for social and environmental consequences. Industrialized countries like Japan and the EU have the ability to defend their own food production and resource systems. This is not true for poor and developing nations who lack rules affecting their sovereign rights as nations to produce food and utilize the earth's resources for their own peoples.

Tilth Producers is here to offer comments on behalf of small-acreage farmers in Washington, and we share certain concerns with our colleagues who farm small holdings around the globe.

We are here to question the inevitability of a concentrated food system owned by a handful of multinational corporations. We are not against international trade. We have member growers who depend on the ability to move food items across international boundaries. We do have serious concerns, however, with trade policy that undermines the ability of poor and developing countries to maintain their own food supply. It is not leveling the playing field to put countries with challenged or insufficient food production systems in the position of becoming indebted to industrialized countries and dependent on exports to purchase food. It is not in our best interests as the leading industrialized country to destabilize weaker countries by destroying traditional cropping systems and population dynamics. It only benefits multi-national corporations to continue the trend of concentration of agricultural inputs, marketing options and distribution systems at the expense of local self-reliance. Our concern is that in the race to remove trade barriers and find market opportunities for our own overproduction, we will continue to accelerate many inequities already initiated by changes made to the GATT during the Uruguay Negotiations.

We have several concerns with some of the proposed rules:

1. The Sanitary and Phytosanitary Standards. Organic farmers have long been fighting for the right to label their foods as grown under specific production systems. We pay for the certification of our organic production methods, and people who want to support organic farmers pay for the right to know how their food is produced. It is critical to a growing number of people that their right to know where and how their food was produced is not diminished. The US government has proposed new rules that severely limit a country's right to know characteristics about production methods for food and fiber, such as whether products are genetically manipulated or irradiated, or how animals are raised for livestock products. These proposals would go directly against the majority of testimony made to USDA by almost 250,000 people in response to proposed USDA

Standards on Organic Foods in 1998.

2. Family Support Programs. Current WTO rules limit the rights of governments to take actions to encourage and support family farmers. This has helped to accelerate the growth of corporate-owned confinement feeding operations. This does not benefit local economies as these CFOs have been and continue to be responsible for enormous environmental damage. Community after community is finding that these operations decrease quality of living for rural area and yield little benefit beyond boosting stockholder assets. We support proposals that would allow all governments to take steps to protect and encourage family farms and discourage corporate-based industrial production.

3. Environmental Protection. Industrialized food production is more reliant on fossil fuels which leads to increases in emissions of greenhouse gases and other pollutants. Environmental damage from industrial agriculture is exacerbated by the cutting of forests to expand export mono-cropping, the loss of biological and genetic diversity and the over-dependence on toxic, synthetic chemicals.

4 Sui Generis. We are also seriously concerned with a proposed rule which would eliminate other countries' rights to protect their local system, or Sui Generis, as was maintained in the Uruguay Round. There is a proposal from the US, as part of the renegotiation of the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) provisions of the WTO, to remove this provision and to require all nations to enact western style patenting laws for all plants and animals. Many government and NGO groups oppose this proposal arguing that it would cause an economic and ecological disaster. We propose that the Sui Generis be strengthened.

There are many other issues equally as important and we appreciate the opportunity to submit more detailed written comments.