

Rural Coalition/Coalición Rural  
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Sign on Letter to U.S. Embassy in Mexico, Delivered January 31, 2003

Dear Mr. Brant, Ms. Schwartz and Mr. Kennedy,

We write to you representing U.S. farmer's organizations, members of the religious community and other supporting organizations, in reaction to the recent events in Mexico regarding the serious crisis of the rural sector and the official U.S. response.

First, we wish to express our support for the campesino organizations that make up the movement "El Campo No Aguanta Más" and other agrarian organizations who have been participating in actions of protest and dialogue with the Mexican government in recent months. Considering the severity of the economic and social situation of the Mexican countryside, we feel it imperative to express our solidarity with their efforts in demanding the establishment of a national strategy to reverse the crisis of the Mexican countryside, including the renegotiation of the agriculture chapter of NAFTA.

However, it is difficult to overlook the very blatant misrepresentation of thousands of U.S. family farmers by officials of the U.S. Embassy in Mexico. According to a December 13 article in the Mexican paper La Jornada, Mr. Brant stated that "if tariffs are frozen there will be a violent response by U.S. farmers." Not only are most U.S. farmers not even aware of the tariff reductions of January 1, 2003 on most agriculture products (due in part to an almost total absence of media coverage), the statement made could not be further from the truth. We consider this false statement as a manipulative tool that served in causing Mexican Senators from backing down from a previous agreement for a one-year freeze of tariff reduction in order to reevaluate the agriculture chapter of NAFTA.

The distinction must be made clear between family farmers and the benefactors of free trade, who are mainly large factory farm operations and agribusiness groups such as Cargill, ConAgra, Archer Daniels Midland and others. It is no surprise who the supporters are, since they are the same companies that participate in the design of agriculture trade policy, who receive millions of dollars in tax-payer subsidies, and who maintain commodity prices at extremely low levels, allowing them to make millions in profits while small farmers remain in poverty.

If the U.S. is truly concerned with the eradication of poverty in developing countries and in our own by promoting free trade, we must have the capacity to recognize the human effects of these policies and the integrity to act to change them.

Sincerely Yours,

National Family Farm Coalition, Washington, DC  
Rural Coalition/Coalición Rural, Washington, DC  
Franciscan Washington Office for Latin America, Washington, DC  
Family Farm Defenders, Madison, WI

United Farm Workers, Sacramento, CA  
Missouri Rural Crisis Center, Columbia, MO  
North East Neighborhood Alliance, Rochester, NY  
Finger Lakes Organic Growers Cooperative, North Rose, NY  
Rural Development Leadership Network, New York, NY  
Corporate Agribusiness Research Project, Everett Main, WA  
Ecumenical Program on Central American and the Caribbean, Washington, DC  
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, Minneapolis, MN  
Oxfam America, Washington, DC  
Minnesota Fair Trade Coalition, Minneapolis, MN  
Global Exchange, San Francisco, CA  
El Comité de Apoyo a Los Trabajadores Agrícolas, Glassboro, NJ, Kennett  
Square, PA  
National Catholic Rural Life Conference, Des Moines, IA  
Texas Farmer's Union, Dallas, TX  
Coalition of Immokalee Workers, Immokalee, FL  
The Episcopal Church Migrant Ministry Committee, Westhampton, NY  
Dakota Resource Council, Dickinson, ND  
Presbyterian Church USA, Washington, DC  
Rural Vermont, Montpelier, VT  
Center of Concern, Washington, DC  
Neil Harvey, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, NM  
Kari Bachman, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, NM  
Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala, Washington, DC  
Robert Harman, California State University, Long Beach, CA  
Witness for Peace, Washington, DC  
World Vision, Washington, DC  
Grantmakers Without Borders, Boston, MA  
Washington Office on Latin America, Washington, DC  
Voices on the Border, Washington, DC  
Dr. Kerry Preibisch, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario  
Action for Social and Ecological Justice, Burlington, VT  
The Markham Center, Montpelier, VT  
Donna Chollett, University of Minnesota, Morris, MN

cc:

President Vicente Fox, Mexico  
President George W. Bush, United States  
Javier Usabiaga, Sagarpa  
Santiago Creel, Secretary of Interior, Mexico

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3. RC Letter to Mexican President Vicente Fox, dated January 31, 2003

Dear Presidente Fox,

In the name of the organizations that make up the Coalición Rural, we write to convey our deep concern for the widening crisis in the countryside of rural Mexico—the same crisis that also affects the small farmers of the United States and Canada.

Our Coalition -- a diverse alliance of community based organizations

representing farmers and farmworkers in the US and Mexico believes that the widely held ownership of land is fundamental to a democratic society. For 25 years we have advocated policies that support equitable distribution of land and equitable access to the benefits of agriculture policy for all sectors of our membership.

Contrary to the opinions expressed recently by the US Ambassador to Mexico, our small farm and farmworker members would strongly support the renegotiation of the Agriculture section of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

The North American Free Trade Agreement has been devastating to all of our communities. In the decade since its inception, the loss of small and minority-owned farms in the United States has been devastating, leaving African-Americans nearly a landless people in the US. Farm foreclosures have also accounted for the greatest loss of land from Indian reservations in recent decades.

During this time, the price of farm commodities, especially corn, remains far below the cost of production. Despite the recent US Farm Bill and its astronomical and indefensible cost, family farmers in the United States continue to operate at a loss. It is only the corporations who profit from the sale of their corn in Mexico.

We find it unconscionable that more than 600 farmers in Mexico are forced off their land every day by the dumping of US -and Canadian--agricultural products at no benefit to communities on either side of the border.

Also, as the result of NAFTA, more than 2000 migrant workers have died since 1993 in their attempts to cross the border in order to find work so they can feed their families. These are men and women who should be making their living from their own land in Mexico. This increased migration of laborers has seen a matching increase in exploitation, farmworkers now earn less than they did two decades ago.

Therefore, we would like to publicly express our full support of the just demands of our brothers and sisters of el movimiento El Campo No Aguanta Más (The Countryside Cannot Bear it Anymore). We ask you to respond favorably to their just demands for:

- 1) A renegotiation of the Agriculture Chapter of the North American Free Trade Agreement;
- 2) Suspension of US and Canadian corn and bean contracts;
- 3) A profound reevaluation and long term plan to restructure Mexican agriculture to include the voice of the peasants;
- 4) Respect for legitimate peasant organizations;
- 5) Quality and safe food for all Mexican consumers;
- 6) Recognition of the rights and culture of the indigenous people as was mandated in the San Andreas Agreements.

We also call upon you to end the repression against the movement, and to dismiss the arrest warrants against its leaders.

The countryside in rural America and rural Canada also cannot bear it anymore, and we stand united with our brothers and sisters in Mexico on these urgent matters. We will be awaiting your response to this letter.

Sincerely,  
John Zippert, Chairperson  
Carlos Marentes, Former Chairperson  
Lorette Picciano, Executive Director

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#### 4. Brief Background

Since the beginning of December, Mexican farmers have carried out massive protests all over Mexico to demand the renegotiations of the agriculture chapter of NAFTA. On January 1, 2003 one of the final stages of tariff elimination took effect that allows all agriculture products to enter Mexico tariff-free, except for corn, beans, sugar cane and powdered milk. Farmers have participated in hunger strikes and the blocking of borders from the entrance of U.S. agriculture products. They have also participated in meetings and dialogue with government officials to search for an answer to the current crisis of the Mexican countryside.

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