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Trading Away a Heritage of Diversity

by Angus Wright

Don Beto doesn't spend much time thinking about the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Instead, he worries about the terraces he has constructed to catch the soil running off the hills behind the town of Tiltepec in northern Oaxaca, Mexico. Are the terraces strong enough? Do they follow the contour lines correctly, so they will form new fields of rich, fine silt? Will the government soil conservation expert continue to allow him to use the necessary machinery?

It took five years for Don Beto and his friend Don Genaro (Don is a title of respect) to convince the government that their way of building terraces was better than textbook methods, which had wasted vast amounts of money and only worsened local problems. Before they got access to the machinery, Don Beto and Don Genaro had to move small mountains of brush, rock, and dirt to construct terraces completely by hand. Although they would hate to go back to that work, they might have to, because their families are completely dependent on the check-dam terraces for food and income. These worries are far more immediate to Don Beto and other Mixtec native people than what will happen if NAFTA is approved.

Yet NAFTA could wreak far more havoc on Don Beto's terraces and his family's livelihood than any torrential rainstorm, long drought, or change in the government's soil conservation policy. For if NAFTA brings Don Beto into direct competition with the mechanized farmers who work the rich, flat, deep soils of Iowa, Don Beto will have to abandon his fields to the storms that will wash them down into the gullies once again.

What is more, the tragedy of Don Beto will be a tragedy for humanity. The loss of traditional agricultural knowledge (including sustainable pest manage-

continued on page 7

Benlate Questions and Secrecy Persist

by Kerry Dressler

"Benlate has caused as much damage as any natural disaster, and Du Pont cannot walk away from its responsibility."

—Bob Crawford, Florida Commissioner of Agriculture, November 5, 1992

Heated controversy continues over Benlate DF, a benomyl fungicide formulation that was withdrawn from the U.S. market in 1991 following widespread reports of crop damage associated with its application, especially in the state of Florida. The manufacturer, E.I. Du Pont de Nemours and Co., has paid out almost US\$500 million to settle approximately 1,900 damage claims, about 1,200 of them from Florida.

Damage to crop and nursery plants following use of Benlate has also been reported in Costa Rica, Jamaica, Thailand, and the Philippines; there also may be problems in other countries. In addition to about 1,900 claims from 40 U.S. states, Du Pont has reported that Benlate suits have been filed "from the Caribbean and Central America," but the number of suits, the countries, and the specific damages remain undisclosed. Two class action lawsuits involving Benlate have been filed, one on behalf of Florida farmworkers, the second on behalf of 24 farmworkers in Puerto Rico. Du Pont has withdrawn Benlate DF use from all of Central America.

In November 1992, Du Pont announced that they would pay no more damage claims. Based on their own field tests, Du Pont concluded that there was no proof of a cause-and-effect relationship between Benlate DF use and the crop losses suffered by claimants. Du Pont presented their findings at a meeting of the Florida Pesticide Review Council on December 4, 1992. The state is now reviewing Du Pont's data and conclusions.

continued on page 12

CONTENTS

Trading Away a Heritage of Diversity	1
Benlate Questions and Secrecy Persist	1
NAFTA is Fundamentally Undemocratic	3
NAFTA Perpetuates Environmental Problems of Canada-U.S. FTA	4
NAFTA Threatens Mexico's Rural Sector, Neglects Crucial Issues	5
NAFTA Overview and Resources	6
Global Implications of Great Lakes Wildlife Research	9
Drug Control and Herbicide Spraying in Colombia	14
News Notes	15
The Resource Pointer	19

NAFTA is Fundamentally Undemocratic

by Kai Mander



When former President Bush signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) December 17, 1992, he brought the United States one step closer to implementing a pact that threatens a crucial principle of democratic government: the right of governing institutions to establish laws representing the will of the people.

NAFTA is based on commitment to a laissez-faire ideology that places businesses in free and unfettered competition with each other so that only the strongest survive. NAFTA's stated goal is to prohibit governments from imposing any restrictions on trade, in order to ensure equal access and influence in the marketplace to all trading partners. This demands that "free trade" be valued over other crucial policy goals, including regulations to address environmental or societal problems.

NAFTA proponents argue that increased competition benefits consumers in the form of lower prices. But consumers also have an interest in keeping their jobs, in protecting their food from harmful chemicals, and in avoiding the environmental devastation resulting from unrestricted competition. Unfortunately, U.S. NAFTA negotiators were so zealous in their pursuit of open markets that even the risk of losing 500,000 U.S. jobs (confirmed by former Labor Secretary Lynn Martin) failed to concern them.

U.S. companies will certainly feel disadvantaged if Mexican businesses remain "unencumbered" by the higher environmental and labor standards that exist in the U.S. If these U.S. companies do not simply move south of the border as predicted, they can be expected to pressure the U.S. government to lower standards domestically in order to "level the playing field." And as job losses grow due to NAFTA, labor may increasingly be drawn into this fight to lower standards by convincing workers that environmental regulations are costing them their jobs.

NAFTA also gives each country the right to object to any of the other countries' laws that adversely affect its economic opportunities. Under NAFTA, the authority for resolving disputes over environmental, labor, and consumer standards that may impact free trade between nations is vested in unaccountable panels of "experts." These dispute panels, which meet in secret, will have the power to preclude each country from enforcing laws and regulations the panel considers unfair barriers to free trade. All U.S. federal, state and local laws that are more protective than the "harmonized" standards would face possible repeal.

The panels would not be comprised of people who have

worked for decades to establish strong health and environmental standards. Rather, they would be made up of people who are heavily biased in favor of free trade because they represent institutions that stand to benefit from a weakening of U.S., Canadian, and Mexican laws.

For example, the NAFTA text names the United Nations subgroup Codex Alimentarius responsible for setting international standards for food. Codex is composed largely of corporate food, chemical, and agribusiness representatives who stand to gain from reducing restrictions on food production methods. Any provision that is contrary to the Codex standards is in potential danger. The U.S.' Delaney Clause, which prohibits carcinogenic pesticide residues and additives in processed foods, could be one of the first eliminated.

One crucial arena for challenging NAFTA is the institution that will be most weakened by the agreement: the U.S. Congress. While NAFTA is expected to pass quickly through the legislatures of Mexico and Canada (where the ruling parties command significant majorities), many members of Congress are concerned about NAFTA's threat to their power to make laws.

If approved, NAFTA, and the global General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), will continue the Reagan/Bush era legacy of giving corporations greater power over our nation's resources and destiny. While President Clinton has expressed certain reservations about NAFTA, he has said he approves of it in principle and will not renegotiate it. However, he has stated that he will not send implementing legislation to Congress until side agreements on labor and environmental issues have been negotiated. Once Congress receives the legislation, they have 90 days to approve or disapprove of the entire agreement, without any opportunity to amend NAFTA text.

A wide range of U.S. organizations — including labor unions, farm worker groups, consumer advocates, environmental organizations and others — have joined forces to encourage the U.S. Congress and President Clinton not to approve NAFTA as it currently stands.

Now is the time for voters to tell their elected representatives that NAFTA is contrary to the constitutional principle of governance by the people, and that unless significant improvements are made to ensure that we as citizens remain able to influence our own laws, nothing less than outright rejection of NAFTA will be acceptable.

Kai Mander is Trade Communications Director at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP). He disseminates information on international trade issues, including the Trade News daily bulletin. He can be reached at IATP, 1313 5th Street SE, Suite 303, Minneapolis, MN 55414; phone (612) 379-5980; fax (612) 379-5982; e-mail: iatp@igc.apc.org.

Editors' note: We asked three activists from the U.S., Canada, and Mexico for their views of what is fundamentally wrong with NAFTA, and why so many activists say "No!" to the agreement as it now stands. Their responses appear on the next several pages. One overarching theme of these articles is the extreme secrecy under which the negotiations were conducted, violating the democratic principles upon which the three governments are based. These brief articles only begin to identify the many serious threats NAFTA poses to workers, public health, and the environment — and the diverse, broad-based opposition to the current agreement. PANNA urges readers to utilize the resources listed on page 6 to obtain more information, and to get involved in trade issues.