

USTR overwhelmed by NAFTA comments...Including ours.

By [Sharon Anglin Treat](#)

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Kicking off the first trade negotiation of the Trump era, over 50,000 individuals, interest groups, and businesses have filed [comments](#) to recommend whether, and how, to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The number of submissions overwhelmed the government website accepting submissions, and caused the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) to extend the comment period, illustrating both the importance of these issues and the public's awareness of what is at stake.

The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP), Food & Water Watch (FWW), the National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC), the Rural Coalition and the Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC) [jointly submitted comments](#) calling for rejecting the NAFTA trade agreement model, and for any future trade provisions related to agriculture “to start from a goal of rebuilding farm and food systems to support fair and sustainable rural economies and food supplies.” Noting that current U.S. trade policy is designed to promote the interests of agribusinesses and other multinational corporations over those of family farmers and rural small businesses, we stated our opposition to the resulting agreements that “have contributed to the economic and social erosion of U.S. rural communities and have devastated farmers in trading

partner nations, who cannot compete with the U.S. dumping of below cost of production crops, meat and dairy products.”

[Echoing the consensus](#) among the U.S., Mexican and Canadian organizations that [that met in late May](#), we urged that going forward, NAFTA should be replaced “with a different agreement with the goal of increasing living standards in all three countries.” Specifically, we called for:

- Improving the transparency of trade talks and consulting with farmers and rural communities;
- Removing Investor-State Dispute Settlement provisions, which favor corporate interests over public needs, evade our legal and judicial system, and threaten policies from action on climate change to water quality protections;
- Restoring Country-of-Origin Meat Labels (COOL), a centerpiece of good food and farm policy that supports both the interests of consumers in knowing where their food comes from and of farmers in selling their products at fair prices;
- Rejecting new proposals from the failed Transpacific Partnership (TPP) to speed up rules on approval of agricultural biotechnology products in ways that bypass national efforts to assess their safety, effectiveness and impacts on workers, rural communities and ecosystems;
- Emulating, not undermining, Canadian dairy supply management programs by promoting the export of high quality dairy products instead of low quality products enhanced with imported Milk Protein Concentrate;
- Ensuring economic viability and resilience in rural communities, with any new trade agreements establishing binding accords to address immigration and to protect farmworkers’ labor and other human rights;
- Enforcing anti-dumping and other rules to protect farmers from unfair imports that distort the domestic market, undermine prices and ultimately compromise the economic viability of independent farmers;
- Protecting public food programs and keeping state and local procurement commitments voluntary; and
- Supporting local efforts to address climate change, so that national, state and local governments retain their sovereignty to enact and implement policies designed to reach their commitments under the Paris Climate Agreement.

A large number of comments submitted by others also directly addressed agriculture and rural development issues, and several submitters strongly supported positions taken by IATP and our partner organizations. The [AFL-CIO](#) and the [United Food & Commercial Workers](#) (UFCW) urged reinstating COOL as a building block of any NAFTA revision, eliminating ISDS, and establishing stronger labor rules and enforcement. The UFCW also supported the Canadian dairy management system, which is [under attack by the U.S.](#) and has been identified as one of the areas where the U.S. may seek changes during the NAFTA renegotiation. [Citizens Trade Campaign](#) urged the USTR to “overhaul NAFTA rules that harm family farmers and feed a destructive agribusiness model” and to end rules “that threaten the safety of our food,” calling for reinstatement of COOL, improved food safety standards, and enhanced border inspections. The Fair World Project in Portland, Oregon [said](#), “The next round of trade agreements must prioritize

agricultural systems that ensure fair payments for farmers, decent agricultural jobs, biodiversity and regenerative agriculture, and healthy food.”

Interestingly, several comments from members of the public, including persons identifying themselves as farmers, reinforced our message. [Berry](#) and [vegetable](#) farmers from Florida and [North Carolina](#) filed statements blaming NAFTA for putting family farmers out of business. Michael Rose, of the North Dakota Farm Bureau, stated simply: ["Please exit Nafta"](#). One commenter from California [stated](#): “NAFTA was heralded as a savior to the American farmer & Agriculture. We managed to drive the small Mexican farmer against the wall with our ability to produce Corn & Beans cheaply thus becoming the breadbasket for that entire country. The devastated Mexican farmer being unable to compete against the low priced commodities looked North taking his family and becoming our illegal immigrants.”

Of course, agribusiness has a different perspective. NAFTA renegotiation could very well turn into a back-door route to impose the failed and destructive policies of the TPP, subverting the U.S. withdrawal from that agreement. Recent [statements](#) by Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross indicate he sees the TPP as the starting point for negotiations, and provisions already agreed to by Canada and Mexico in that agreement as low hanging fruit for the NAFTA renegotiation. Big agriculture has jumped on this bandwagon, and comments submitted by the [North American Meat Institute](#), the [National Oilseed Processors Association](#) representing soy, canola and other seed industries, [USA Rice](#), and [United Egg Producers](#) among other business associations call for including in NAFTA the weakened food safety standards promoted by the TPP, policies that support speeded-up biotech approvals, and “regulatory cooperation” to adopt policies in other countries as “equivalent” even when they are demonstrably less protective of health or the environment. Even though COOL for pork and beef has already been repealed by Congress, NAMI and NOPA want to make doubly sure that labeling does not return in some form. Their comments specifically urge the complete elimination of mandatory country of origin labeling, with NOPA claiming COOL "will subject U.S. made products to billions of dollars of tariffs and make American beef and pork less competitive in international markets."

If the NAFTA negotiations proceed as in the past -- shrouded by secrecy, with no public access to proposed or agreed-to text, and with corporations given preferential access to negotiators and proposals – there can be no expectation that the “modernized” NAFTA will be any better for farmers, consumers and rural communities than the original. In fact, with the TPP proposals ready to hand and powerful corporate agriculture already pushing hard to turn NAFTA into a mini-TPP, the trade deal could get much, much worse. IATP will be doing everything we can in the days and weeks ahead, working with our U.S. partners and counterparts from civil society in Mexico and Canada, to open up the process to put people first.