

## A Family Farmer Wish List for 2005

By: John E. Peck

'Tis the season to reflect upon the past and wish for better in the future, and those who support family farming have a rather long "to-do" list for 2005. Unlike such noble ideals as peace on earth and goodwill towards everyone, these goals are actually quite practical and achievable in the coming New Year. By planting the seeds now, we could all enjoy the fruits of such a home-grown sustainable agriculture agenda for years to come.

Country of Origin Labeling (COOL): This was passed in the last Farm Bill but has been stalled by agribusiness lobbyists ever since. People in every other major industrialized democracy have the right to know where their food comes from - why not people in the U.S.? Congress and the White House should immediately pass and implement mandatory country of origin of labeling (COOL), so that farmers and consumers can reclaim their ability to make educated informed choices in the market place.

Fair Trade - NOT Free Trade: Passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) over ten years ago has proven to be an unmitigated disaster, spawning more sweatshops and factory farms, lower wage rates, higher toxic emissions, as well as food contamination and commodity dumping. Congress needs to reject further free trade deals, such as the proposed Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), and focus instead on promoting fair trade policies that guarantee workers' rights, consumer safety, food sovereignty, and environmental protection.

National Livestock ID: Europe 's Mad Cow epidemic over fifteen years ago led many other countries (such as Japan, Australia, and Brazil) to mandate national livestock identification and tracking systems, but once again powerful agribusiness interests frustrated such sensible preventative measures here. Now Europeans even have "passports" for their pets, but no one knows where the cows are in the U.S.! Disease spread through livestock feed and live animals is a serious public health threat and deserves to be dealt

with responsibly at government - not farmer - expense. Wisconsin has already initiated a model livestock identification and tracking system and the USDA should be following suit, rather than running interference for the meat cartel.

**Anti-Trust Enforcement:** When only a handful of businesses control a majority of the economy, then a "free market" no longer exists and the government needs to intervene. This has long been the scenario for agriculture in the U.S., particularly at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange (CME) where insider trading, kickback schemes, and price-fixing are rampant. Investigators at the U.S. Dept. of Justice, in conjunction with state attorney generals such as Eliot Spitzer of New York, are to be applauded for exposing the illegal activities of Dairy Farmers of America (DFA) and more diligent anti-trust action needs to be taken against other food industry giants.

**Terminate Check-Offs:** The injustice of "taxation without representation" led American patriots to hold the Boston Tea Party long ago, yet family farmers today are still being forced to pay into all sorts of generic commodity promotion campaigns (\$700 + million per year for everything from milk and pork to honey and mushrooms) that are often detrimental to their very survival. One of these cases involving the beef checkoff is now before the U.S. Supreme Court, and consumers as well as farmers would be better served if such biased industry-controlled programs were eliminated altogether.

**Biotech Liability:** After a rash of drug scandals, pharmaceutical companies are finally being held accountable for the shoddy safety testing and dangerous side-effects behind their lucrative products. Biotech giants, though, continue to evade responsibility for their patented discoveries, leaving farmers and consumers to deal with potential health problems, increasing resistance, genetic contamination, and other costly consequences. Field trials of biotech crops were recently called off in Britain when government officials told industry executives they would be held financially liable for any problems. Such corporate accountability also needs to be applied in the U.S.

Defend Local Control: Another hallmark of the U.S. revolution was the struggle for self-determination, yet this basic freedom is now threatened by unaccountable agencies and their faceless appointees. Under this New World Order, secretive tribunals of the World Trade Organization (WTO) can literally force consumers to buy hormone-induced milk/meat and make farmers plant biotech crops against their will. In Wisconsin, rural communities and local residents have even lost their say over the zoning and regulation of factory farms to an unelected statewide technical board! Similar insidious attempts to preempt local control are now being proposed elsewhere such as in Minnesota. This erosion of grassroots democracy can and must be stopped.

Bush's outgoing Dept. of Health and Human Services Secretary, Tommy Thompson, was refreshingly honest in his farewell warning that the U.S. food system is in grave danger. The worst threat is not due to foreign terrorism, though, but is to be found in corruption, negligence, and complacency much closer to home. America has managed to overcome agricultural crisis and food insecurity before and can do so again, but only if elected officials find the fortitude and leadership necessary to do what is right by family farmers.

John E. Peck grew up on a 260 acre farm near Rockville, MN and is executive director of Family Farm Defenders, a national grassroots organization based in Madison, WI.

Family Farm Defenders, P.O. Box 1772, Madison, WI 53701  
Tel./fax #608-260-0900 [www.familyfarmdefenders.org](http://www.familyfarmdefenders.org)

"People need more than to understand their obligation to one another and to earth; they also need the feeling of such an obligation."

- Wendell Berry