

Do We Really Have Competition in the Market Place?

by Jim Horne, President, Kerr Center

Recently, I became associated with a group called the Organization for Competitive Markets (OCM). Fred Stokes, OCM President, called me last winter and we started talking about competition, the power of big business, the decay of farming communities, and the loss of farmers. After several conversations, I became convinced that we were on the same page. He also made the same determination about me after reading a letter I had sent to Agriculture Secretary Glickman. (See *Field Notes*, v. 25, #1, spring 1999).

After serious consideration I sent a check to OCM. The group seemed to be right on target with what we in sustainable agriculture believe. It was addressing basic issues of freedom, democracy, and social justice, and I wanted to be part of it. Composed of farmers, ranchers and other concerned citizens from across the country, the organization was established in 1998. Their mission: to reestablish fair and truly competitive markets for agricultural products; and to protect those markets from any abuse of power. They are a member-driven, democratic organization.

Some have called OCM "the Marine Corps of American agriculture": small, but standing tall.

In a short while, I found myself agreeing that the Kerr Center would help sponsor a food and agriculture policy retreat with the American Farmland Trust, under the direction of OCM. The Retreat, held from April 29 to May 1, 2000 in Parkville, Missouri, was a unique meeting of perhaps the most diverse and highest quality thinkers ever convened on farm and food policy. The impetus for the retreat stemmed from the widespread dissatisfaction with the current status of agricultural policy and market structure; the increasing consumer concern about the quality of their food and how food is produced; and the belief that progress must come from an approach that considers a wider range of stakeholders than merely agribusiness.

OCM assembled top thinkers in a host of knowledge systems, or disciplines, relevant to food and agriculture. The participants in the retreat included lawyers, political scientists, community advocates, sociologists, agricultural historians and agricultural economists. What I liked about

the group was that they were able to abandon the practice of using a Cartesian reductionist model of breaking the dynamic world into pieces and analyzing the resulting components in an incomplete approximation of full reality. Instead, the retreat provided a forum where the participants no longer discussed problems and solutions in the exclusive company of others of their profession. Instead, antitrust lawyers were challenged by rural sociologists who were, in turn, challenged by agricultural economists and so on.

This approach has resulted in a report which more fully captures the dynamic world of the farm

and food system in multiple planes. For example, the proper balance among market forces, government actions, and civil society values is closely examined. At the same time, this report deals extensively with the proper structure of the industry at the production, processing, marketing and consumption levels. Topics range from supply and demand concerns of conventional farm policy to the needs of poor urban consumers.

Titled *A Food and Agriculture Policy for the 21st Century*, the report is now receiving a lot of press and a number of decision makers have it under study. It sets forth a valuable model for food production in the century to come, a model that ensures fairness through a level playing field, and one that will protect natural resources for future generations.

More About the Report

Edited by Michael C. Stumo, *Food and Agriculture Policy for the 21st Century* provides guidelines for a better farm and food system that focuses on four areas: antitrust policy, conventional farm programs, whole food system strategies, agricultural research policy.

Additionally, many of the seventeen participants contributed individual papers addressing cutting-edge issues of public concern.

Kerr Center president Jim Horne co-authored, with William J. Weida of the Department of Economics, Colorado College, "Agricultural Research Policy: Serving Public, Rather Than Private Interests." Horne also contributed, with Manjula Guru, "The New Biotechnological Age."

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