

A closer look at who will be attending the DOJ/USDA workshops

By Sara Wyant

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Ankeny, Iowa. March 12. A record crowd is expected for today's first ever Department of Justice/USDA workshop on agriculture and competition, with over 650 already registered. If a town hall meeting held Thursday to rally those who want to "Bust up big ag" is any indication, it is likely to be a very diverse group.

Thursday's town hall was organized by Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement (ICCI), Food Democracy Now!, the National Family Farms Coalition and Food and Water Watch. Their prepared press release that they handed out prior to the meeting carried the headline: "More than 200 people Pack Town hall meeting in Iowa to tell Feds: Bust Up Big Ag."

The room at the Best Western Hotel in Ankeny was packed, but I counted about 160 (not including about ten members of the press and those working on registration). The largest segment represented the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) Region 6), most of whom wore yellow shirts or their union logos. A member from Davenport, Iowa told me that there were 50 people representing UFCW who would be at the workshop today.

Several people from the audience took advantage of an opportunity to speak for one minute about their respective causes. We heard from a diverse group including the Pesticide



Action Network, the Food and Commercial Workers International Union, the Land Stewardship Project, local food advocates, consumers, and a few farmers from Iowa, North Dakota, Wisconsin, Missouri, Arkansas, and Indiana.

Although moderator Barb Kalbach and panelist George Naylor actively farm in Iowa, there appeared to be fewer than 20 active farmers in the room. Denise O'Brien, a small Iowa farmer and former candidate for Secretary of Agriculture spoke up, as did Francis Thicke, an Iowa farmer and current candidate for Iowa Secretary of Agriculture.

Dozens of lobbyists and industry representatives are expected to be on hand for the workshop today, along with Congressmen, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and Attorney General Eric Holder. Although I didn't recognize any representatives of "big ag" in the room, one gentleman took the podium to tell them what he thought.

"For you corporate spies in the room, you are low lives," he emphasized.

Several reporters will be covering the event today, including major wire service reporters---- some of whom already have particular angles in mind. As he worked the room talking to participants last night, we heard reporter Christopher Leonard say: "I'm with the Associated Press and I dig up dirt on Monsanto."

Look for more coverage of this event on www.Agri-Pulse.com

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