



Farmer co-op campaign aims to protect vital system from Justice Department threat

By Agri-Pulse Staff

© Copyright Agri-Pulse Communications, Inc.

Washington, Feb. 10 – Feeling threatened by the Justice Department’s new focus on antitrust issues, the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives (NCFC) launched a response last week at its 81st Annual Meeting in Santa Barbara, California. NCFC plans to explain to policy makers, government officials, and the American public the vital services provided by the nearly 3,000 local farmer cooperatives across the country

Based on the theme of “Farmer Cooperatives: Providing for America,” the campaign will emphasize the central role that co-ops play in preserving the family farm, supporting the rural economy, and bringing innovative products to consumers in the U.S. and around the world.

“From corner groceries, to superstores, to school lunch programs, farmer cooperatives provide the affordable, abundant food, fiber and fuel that America needs,” said NCFC President & CEO Chuck Conner in his speech to attendees. “Through our Farmer Co-ops: Providing for America campaign, NCFC will be carrying these messages and more to policy makers, government officials and the American public.”

NCFC launches the campaign with the first joint Justice Department/USDA workshop on antitrust issues in agriculture March 12th in Ankeny, Iowa. NCFC and its members maintain that the officials holding the workshops must realize that the Capper-Volstead Act, which provides limited antitrust immunity to farmers forming co-ops, is a cornerstone to ensuring competition in agriculture and a vibrant rural economy. NCFC points out that without Capper-Volstead, farmer co-ops could not exist, and any two farmers coming together to talk about price would face harsh civil and criminal antitrust penalties.

“The DOJ/USDA hearings on antitrust in agriculture may seem harmless, but I can tell you this, the officials with DOJ are questioning the very foundation of farmer cooperatives the Capper-Volstead Act,” Conner continued. “Our job is to tell the true stories of co-ops, and the benefits that they provide to their farmer-owners, to their local rural communities, and to consumers in the U.S. and around the world. In doing this, we

aim to ensure that our children and grandchildren can continue farming in partnership with their co-ops.”

Conner also explained NCFC’s unease with the hearings and their probable focus on farmer co-ops. “In fact, Christine Varney, the head of Justice’s Antitrust Division, said in sworn congressional testimony, that the Capper-Volstead Act might not be the right law for the state of the industry at this time and could revoke it,” Conner said. “This statement leads me to believe that Varney and others at DOJ think that individual farmers can compete, without their co-ops, with the huge, multinational corporations up and down the value chain.”

Former Agriculture Secretary Jack Block also addressed the NCFC meeting and gave attendees an overview of the public policy issues that will be faced by agriculture this year. Block, who still works his family farm in Illinois, also emphasized the need for the member-owners of farmer cooperatives to become active partners with NCFC and other trade associations in putting a “farmer face” on agriculture to protect the co-op system which handle, process and market virtually every type of agricultural commodity; provide farmers with access to infrastructure necessary to manufacture, distribute and sell a variety of farm inputs; and offer credit and related financial services, including export financing.

For other *Agri-Pulse* news stories, go to: www.agri-pulse.com.

#30