



Why Should We Care About the Trans-Pacific Free Trade Agreement?

EDITOR'S NOTE: The proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) treaty is being touted as the biggest free trade agreement ever, currently involving 12 countries. Promoters of the TPP, like Cargill and other agribusiness firms, say it will create jobs and provide a boost to the American economy, including agriculture. The Land Stewardship Project believes, however, that if we want vibrant local economies and food systems, as well as a healthy environment, then people who are directly concerned with those issues need to have a say. A highly restricted and secretive process is being used to push through this trade deal, and that excludes people in favor of corporations, says LSP Policy Program Director Mark Schultz. In addition, so-called "fast track" authority is being proposed as part of this deal. This would give the U.S. President excessive power over trade negotiations while largely excluding Congress from the debate. LSP recently joined with several allies in calling for a TPP development process that is open and adheres to basic fair trade standards, while respecting the authority of local, state and national governments. Schultz, who is also LSP's Associate Director and Director of Programs, recently talked to the *Land Stewardship Letter* about concerns with the Trans-Pacific Partnership treaty and fast track authority.

LSL: *Negotiations on the Trans-Pacific Partnership treaty have been going on since 2009, but little is known about its content. Why?*

Schultz: Basically, the promoters of TPP fear the treaty would be voted down if the public knew what it was about. There has been an unprecedented amount of secrecy surrounding this treaty. Parties taking part in the development of the TPP have signed a confidentiality agreement requiring them to share proposals only with "government officials and individuals who are part of the government's domestic trade advisory process." Members of Congress and law experts are kept out of the loop. Meanwhile, some 600, mostly corporate, "advisers," including megafirms like Cargill, have had access to the text. So a handful of multinational corporations control the content of a trade agreement that could have major impacts on a public that has no say in it.

LSL: *What are some of those potential impacts?*

Schultz: One thing we have learned about the TPP is that it will contain something called "regulatory coherence." That's a benign-sounding term that would have major adverse impacts on critical issues that LSP members care about.

For example, TPP may allow countries and even foreign corporations to challenge the use of Country of Origin Labeling (COOL), which was passed by Congress 12 years ago. COOL requires identifying the source of meat products, something the majority of consumers and farmers support. International agribusinesses oppose COOL and would love to use TPP to get rid of it.

Hitting even closer to home, the TPP is being written so that corporations and foreign governments could prevent people from working through their local units of government to stop or regulate unwanted development, like corporate-backed frac sand mines or factory farms. There are examples of this already, such as in 2012, when a U.S. energy firm used the authority it said the North American Free Trade Agreement granted it to level a \$250 million lawsuit against a Quebec town, which had put in place a moratorium on fracking. The justification? That the local ordinance would impede the corporation's "expected future profits." Well, Midwesterners value local democracy, and we have fought hard to maintain the right of local control. We don't want an imposed trade policy that prevents people from doing what they know is right for their community and the land.

This take-away of power from we the

people impacts a host of other priorities that people have, like creating public policy so our schools and hospitals can choose to buy local sustainably-raised and culturally appropriate food for better health. Talk about impeding corporate "expected future profits."

LSL: *How would "fast track" authority affect TPP?*

Schultz: Fast track gives the President power to make trade deals without consulting Congress, subverting any opportunity for regular people to have a say about these agreements, through their elected representatives or otherwise. President Barack Obama and pro-corporate allies in both parties are pushing hard for fast track. Allowing it to happen would be an economic and democratic disaster, pure and simple.

LSL: *Supporters of TPP say its benefits far outnumber the negatives. It will produce unprecedented job growth and economic development, for example.*

Schultz: To listen to major corporations and their supporters in Congress, we are always just one trade deal away from unlimited riches. The facts just don't support that. Consider the Korean Free Trade Agreement signed in 2011. According to a March report from Public Citizen, U.S. exports to Korea are down 11 percent two years after that agreement went into effect. Meanwhile, imports from Korea are up 47 percent. U.S. agriculture has been hit particularly hard, with exports of meat and other products to Korea down 41 percent.

And then there are the hidden costs of these trade deals. The North American Free Trade Agreement has created huge disruptions in places like Mexico, causing people to flee rural areas in search of low-paying jobs here in America. Who really benefits from this insecurity in the lives of people, created in the service of "trade"?

LSL: *So what kind of timeline are we on with TPP?*

Schultz: There is a hard push to get all of the participating countries to sign off on the agreement and for fast track authority to be granted to the President yet this year. It's time members of Congress heard from average citizens that this secretive, undemocratic process is no way to do business, here or internationally. □

For details on how to make your voice heard concerning Fast Track and corporate trade deals, see www.landstewardshipproject.org or contact Mark Schultz at 612-722-6377, marks@landstewardshipproject.org.