



Exports not the basis of sustainable local food economies

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As the push for fast-track trade authority intensifies, there has been an onslaught of new promotional materials from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, including Virginia Manuel's [Feb. 24 BDN OpEd](#). These opinion pieces assert that fast-track and new free-trade agreements would increase farm exports and, by extension, improve rural livelihoods. But they don't back up these assertions with specifics, and they are silent on the possible negative impacts on rural communities and our food systems. Further, they never explain how the inherently undemocratic fast-track trade-agreement approval process is necessary or beneficial.

While the national debate on these trade agreements is just getting going, the Maine Citizen Trade Policy Commission published [a report](#) last July on the potential impacts of new free-trade agreements on Maine agriculture. That report, co-written by Karen Hansen-Kuhn of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy and John Piotti of the Maine Farmland Trust, also was the subject of two public hearings and highlighted several key concerns.

The report highlighted that Maine's dairy farmers — like all American dairy farmers — have struggled for the past decade because of low-producer prices. One big point of controversy in the [Trans-Pacific Partnership](#) talks has been New Zealand's demand to fully [open U.S. dairy markets](#) to their exports. This could have huge repercussions for local farmers, who benefit from federal programs to stabilize dairy prices, supplemented by Maine's [Dairy Stabilization Program](#). Those two programs work in tandem to stabilize prices for farmers at minimal cost, a process that could fall apart if an increase in imports drives prices down.

That kind of local program could also be subject to challenge under the special corporate courts that would be established in Trans-Pacific Partnership and the [Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership](#). Under the trade deals, foreign investors could sue governments over measures that undermine their expected profits. This provision is coming under attack across the political spectrum from liberal [Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Massachusetts](#), to the conservative [CATO Institute](#). Already, Phillip Morris is using this provision to attack Australia's cigarette labeling laws. Could Maine's or Vermont's GMO labeling laws be next?

Another concern raised by the report is the potential impact on Maine's "buy local" food procurement policies, as European negotiators are seeking to eliminate those U.S. state and local procurement preferences in the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. These programs

have contributed to positive changes that are creating jobs, bringing new farmers to Maine and increasing land in production. The number of Maine farmers aged 34 and younger grew by nearly 40 percent from 2007 to 2012 — from 396 to 551 — far surpassing the 1.5 percent increase nationally. The value of Maine agricultural products has increased 24 percent in five years, and the amount of land in farming increased by 8 percent in the same time period. These successes didn't happen by accident; they resulted from policy choices the Maine trade commission report indicates could be undermined by the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership.

The report also highlighted that tariff barriers to Maine's exports, particularly in the European Union, already are quite low. The real issue, one that came out strongly in comments at the public hearings, is not whether we can generate a few more farm exports but what we are giving up in exchange.

In the end, what matters is whether trade and agriculture policies help us get to a better food system. The only way to get to that point is through a fair, transparent and inclusive process that takes the best from local innovations, such as farm-to-school programs, farmers markets and consumer protections, and builds on them to provide healthy foods at fair prices. While important, exports are the icing on the cake, not the basis of sustainable local economies.

Perhaps Maine should be exporting the idea of the Citizen Trade Policy Commission. We should be taking a hard look at the impacts of trade agreements in process, based on real information about their contents instead of rushing into a secretive process that could have repercussions for decades to come.