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## No friend of farmers

By John Nichols

The fierce farm crisis that is ravaging rural America garnered scant attention during the 2000 presidential campaign that yielded a George W. Bush presidency, so it came as no surprise that Bush's nomination of California agribusiness operative Ann Veneman for the post of Secretary of Agriculture mustered far less comment than those of Attorney General-designee John Ashcroft or Interior-designee Gale Norton.

Yet, because of the broad authority she would be handed as Agriculture Secretary and because of her extreme politics, Veneman could well turn out to be Bush's most dangerous selection. Veneman's track record suggests that, if confirmed, she will use her position as head of a powerful agency with responsibility for implementing federal farm policy, protecting food safety and preserving public lands to advance what farm activist Mark Ritchie describes as "strictly pro-agribusiness, pro-pesticide company, pro-pharmaceutical company positions."

While the Clinton administration practiced malignant neglect during the 1990s -- as farm income plummeted to record lows and 75,000 farm families were forced from the land between 1993 and 1997 alone -- a Bush Department of Agriculture under Veneman's leadership would in the view of savvy farm activists mount a full frontal assault on the future of family farming. At the same time, a Veneman-run USDA would threaten food safety standards, favor the interests of timber and mining companies that seek to exploit public lands, and become a bullwark of the push for the corporate free-trade agenda.

As a key member of the Reagan and Bush administration farm teams, as director of the California Department of Food and Agriculture during the gubernatorial administration of agribusiness favorite Pete Wilson, as a agribusiness lawyer and as a member of the national steering committee of Farmers and Ranchers for Bush, Veneman has rarely missed an opportunity to promote a free-trade regimen that advances the interests of international food-production and processing conglomerates, to encourage policies that lead to the displacement of family farms with huge factory farms, to open public lands for mineral extraction and timbering, to support genetic modification of food and to defend biotech experimentation with agriculture. Indeed, Veneman is a biotech absolutist who served on the board of Calgene, the corporation that launched the first genetically engineered food in 1994, and declared last year that, "We simply will not be able to feed the world without biotechnology."

Most Americans still imagine farms as family-run ventures where a measure of environmental stewardship is practiced, but that agrarian vision is profoundly threatened today, as family farmers find they no longer can compete in a global market dominated by corporate agribusiness monopolies. Veneman has for the better part of two decades served as the point-person for a so-called "modern" vision of farming that has more to do with global-positioning satellites and genetic engineering than the tending of fields and the care of animals. With Veneman's encouragement, California developed an increasingly conglomerated, big-farm, chemically-enhanced version of food production that Iowa Farmers Union President John Whitaker describes as "an entirely different face of agriculture" from that practiced or desired by most working farmers in America.

"I don't want to see that face transferred to Iowa," says Whittaker. But if Veneman the reins of the USDA as Congress is preparing to rewrite the dismally flawed "Freedom-to-Farm Act" -- which U.S. Sen. Paul Wellstone, D-Minn., aptly dubs the "Freedom-to-Fail Act" -- the transfer may be unavoidable. While it is

true that members of the House will drive the process, this will be the first time since the 1950s that a Republican Congress and a Republican Agriculture Secretary will be working in unison to implement "reforms" that are likely to further tip the balance in favor of agribusiness conglomerates.

But a Secretary Veneman would not merely be hustling to deliver for Bush's corporate contributors on domestic farm policy and public-land use issues; she'd also be working for them on the international stage. A militant free trader with decades-old ties to the masters of the new global economy, Veneman helped negotiate the Uruguay round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, which cleared the way for development of the World Trade Organization. In addition, she was actively involved in negotiating the U.S.-Canada Free Trade Agreement and the North American Free Trade Agreement.

So determined is Veneman to advance the free-trade agenda that Bush transition-team aides briefly considered her as a candidate for the position of U.S. Trade Representative before handing her the keys to the USDA, with its 100,000-member staff and \$100 billion budget, to a woman who has already proven her willingness to sacrifice the interests of American farmers of the altar of trade liberalization. Even as family farmers were marching in the streets of Seattle to protest WTO interference with agricultural supports and food-safety standards, Veneman was in Seattle to tell the WTO to move more aggressively to remove so-called "technical barriers to trade."

"(Veneman) has taken the most shrill, ideologically-driven positions on trade and agriculture," says Ritchie, president of the Minneapolis-based Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. "She seems to be coming in with the notion that her job is to be as extreme as possible in parroting the agribusiness line. The problem is that that line is completely out-of-synch with what farmers want, what consumers want and what we know to be scientifically, ecologically and economically right."