

Losing the Family Farm...

Thai Farmers warn Americans what's at stake with the Thai-US Free Trade Agreement

Written by Ellen Roggemann and Chris Westcott

Standing on the edge of one of the few remaining family farms in the United States, a group of Thai and American organic farmers looked out over an endless expanse of corn and soybean fields. Here in central Illinois three farmers from Surin province, Phakphum Inpaen, Kanya Onsri, and Arat Saengubon, were face-to-face with one of the major threats behind the Thai-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (Thai-US FTA): subsidized U.S. agribusiness.

“Fifty years ago this whole area used to be small family-operated farms, now mostly all of the land is either owned or leased to large agricultural corporations,” said Thomas Spaulding a farmer at Angelic Organic Farm, which stands as a small reminder of traditional agriculture in a sea of monocropped and chemically farmed fields.



Kanya Onsri, a farmer from Surin Province, looks over endless fields of corn and soybeans in Illinois -- September 30, 2005

“This is what we’re afraid of happening to our farms in Northeast Thailand,” replied Kanya Onsri, a small-scale rice farmer from Surin province.

Inpaen, Onsri, and Saengubon exchanged hardships with Thomas Spaulding as part of a speaking tour of the US organized by the Educational Network for Global and Grassroots Exchange (ENGAGE), a US based non-profit started by former students of a study-abroad program based in Khon Kaen. During the three-week tour, they spoke to over 1,000 people about the threat the Thai-US FTA negotiations hold for Thai small-scale farmers.

They told audiences that the Thai-US FTA is poised to allow unnaturally cheap products to flood Thai markets drowning out Thai production, endanger Thailand’s biodiversity, and force Thailand to accept the importation and production of unlabelled genetically modified food products.

According to the Alternative Agriculture Network approximately 400,000 farming families have been affected by cheap imports of corn and soybean since Thailand joined the World Trade Organization in 1994. Thai farmers are worried that the Thai-US FTA will worsen this problem by increasing imports of US-grown corn and soybean which can sell at artificially low prices because of the approximately US \$50 billion dollars the US government uses to subsidize corn and soybean production from 1995-2003.

The vast majority of US subsidies, as Thomas Spaulding explains, go to large mega-farms and agribusiness in the US, not to small-scale family farms. The Environmental Working Group, a US-based non-profit organization, estimates that the richest ten percent of farms received seventy-two percent of the over US \$131 billion total subsidies given out in the past eight years.

While in Washington DC, the Thai delegation spoke with two Mexican farmers who were raising-awareness about the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which illustrates the impact of signing a free trade agreement with the U.S. Pedro Jose Torres Ochoa, a Mexican corn farmer, notes that since Mexico signed NAFTA in 1994 more than 2 million Mexican farming families have migrated from their farms as a result of artificially cheap corn imports from the US.

Inpaen, Onsri, and Saengubon also expressed Thai farmer's opposition to the intellectual property rights (IPR) package favored by the US that allows life forms, such as plants and seeds, to be patented by multinational corporations. The IPR system favors technologically advanced countries without requiring companies to secure prior approval for experimenting on another country's biodiversity or to share benefits with the country of origin.



Phakphum Inpaen greets American listener in Washington DC, -- September 29, 2005

As Arat Saengubon explains, "This allows US companies to profit off of the rich biodiversity of Thailand."

Thai farmers are worried that the IPR package put forward by the US will weaken Thailand's ability to protect its most prized plant and seed varieties including Jasmine rice.

"If we loose Jasmine rice than we are losing the most important resource of the poor, we'll loose our livelihood," states Phakphum Inpaen.

Another possible development explained to American audiences is the spread of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) in Thailand due to pressure from US negotiators.

Thai farmers fear that the two laws currently prohibiting commercial production of GMO seeds and requiring the labeling of GMO food products in Thailand are in danger of being repealed in exchange for increased market access for Thai produced chicken and shrimp. An increase in GMO foods, argue the farmers, will not benefit small-scale farmers, but instead will give large agribusiness more ability to control the food chain.

During the tour, the Thai farmers met with various American groups resisting free trade agreements. "Free trade is destroying communities in Thailand just like it is destroying communities here in Maine," exclaims Laura Millay, Project Coordinator for Food and Medicine, a US-based workers rights organization campaigning against free trade agreements. Millay estimates that approximately 20,000 manufacturing jobs have been lost in Maine since 2000 as a result of free trade policies.

In all six regions of the US visited by the delegation of Thai farmers, Americans asked how they could help support small-scale farmers and oppose the Thai-US FTA. Onsri, Inpaen, and Saengubon urged students, consumers, religious groups, non-profit organizations, and elected officials to call for a more democratic negotiation process for both Thai and US citizens. Currently FTAs can be ratified in Thailand by the Prime Minister without ever passing parliament.

According to Oxfam America, the US is trying to speed up the timetables of most of the free trade agreements it is currently negotiating, including that with Thailand. The US Trade Representative hopes to send as many agreements to Congress as possible before the expiration of "Trade Promotion Authority" in July 2007. Under TPA, Members of Congress can only vote up or down on a free trade agreement; they cannot make any amendments. By pushing the negotiations and ratification of the US-Thai FTA to their completion as quickly as possible, the US is trying to prevent legislators from having any power to change provisions in the trade agreement they believe might have negative effects on citizens in Thailand or in the US.

Throughout the tour the image of corporate-owned corn and soybean mega-farms in Illinois rested firmly in the minds of Inpaen, Onsri, and Saengubon as a constant reminder of what's at stake for Thai small-scale farmers with free trade agreements (FTA), and the importance of delivering their message to Americans: support Fair Trade not free trade to enable small scale farmers to stay on the farm.