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Agricultural Outlook Forum

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MEDIA VIEWPOINT

Elizabeth Becker
Former New York Time's
International Trade Correspondent, Journalist

WHY TRADE POLICY WILL CHANGE U.S. FARM POLICY

By Elizabeth Becker

In talking about U.S. trade and farm policies I can't decide which saying is the more appropriate: live by the sword, die by the sword, or the more barnlike, what's good for the goose is good for the gander? During the last few years it seems that the more the United States government and American farmers profess their belief that trade is the answer for its agriculture sector, the more they shy away from tying their farm policy to the new realities of global trade.

While some policy makers proclaim proudly that one out of three acres in the U.S. are now planted for export, another set warns that only Congress will determine farm policy - not trade negotiators and certainly not the W.T.O.

Does it have to be such an either/or proposition? A review of the last few years of trade negotiations and trade disputes raises some serious questions about how long this attitude can work for American farmers. Farm policy is no longer hidden in the shadows or restricted to the corridors of Congress. It is at the center of domestic and international debate. It's not just poor countries who want the U.S. to reduce agricultural subsidies. Health officials are pointing to them as a cause of obesity. Development experts, global health experts and energy officials are all calling for a re-examination of how the government supports American farmers. If the farm bill of 2007 bears a close resemblance to the one it replaces, the U.S. could find itself in a difficult position in the world of trade without a lot of allies.

Here are the views gained since covering agriculture during the debate over the 2002 farm bill and subsequent coverage of trade talks:

- . Congressional Debate: Bipartisan lawmakers, suspicion about how trade talks will affect their freedom to write farm policy plus their suspicion about Europe's farm and trade policies.

- . American farmers, understanding of the trade debate: the stakes for the 2007 farm bill and rural policy in general.

- . The debate on the other side of the Atlantic: from policymakers, consumers, farmers and industry.

- . How the development aspect of the Doha round has already affected farm policy with an emphasis on the cotton controversy.