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Government Livestock Tracking and the Global Rural Minority

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Government central livestock registration and tracking systems, first conceived by the European Union in the 1990s, have spread to other highly developed nations through relentless promotion by global meat and dairy companies and the technology firms who supply the mandated equipment. Now the globalists and dominant governments are poised to force the system upon the developing world. The World Animal Health Organisation/Organisation Mondiale de la Sante Animale (OIE) sponsored a March 2009 meeting in Buenos Aires to promote such systems. These systems are devastating to the small-scale independent ownership of livestock. Governments and organizations dedicated to the preservation of rural cultures and peoples must resist the unjust imposition of these animal registration systems.

I. Introduction

At some undetermined point in 2008, the global human population of urban areas for the first time exceeded the rural population. [1] This is a vital watershed in human cultural and social development and, sadly, it may foretell some harsh consequences for all peoples, urban and rural alike. Urban people increasingly are being made dependent upon large corporate systems of food and energy production and distribution. They lack the opportunities available to rural peoples for small-scale food and energy independence. Many urban people can subsist only through corporate or industrial jobs that corrode personal independence and self-sufficiency. Traditional rural cultures offer means of obtaining life's necessities (food and shelter) through direct personal and community effort, and support extended group relationships to care for the sick or elderly. But the increasing urbanization demanded by a corporate-controlled economic and political system is destroying the rural cultures so badly needed as an alternative to urban problems. Rural people are seeing their livelihoods, their economic and food security, even their natural surroundings impaired by the incursions of the same corporate systems of food production and of resource exploitation that have fostered urbanization and its problems. At a time when we should be strengthening and returning to rural cultures, we may instead be on the brink of losing their blessings forever.

One factor accelerating these disastrous trends, and which thus far has received insufficient attention from the media and non-governmental organizations, is the proliferation, over the past decade, of mandatory government systems of livestock identification, registry, and tracking. The idea that a central national government should be permitted to charge people for the “privilege” of keeping livestock, and burden livestock-keeping with a total tracking system, is quite simply madness. These systems typically encompass three components: (1) government registration of all people who keep livestock; (2) government-enforced electronic identification and registration of each individual animal; and (3) a government or corporate database for mandatory reporting of every change in location or status of each animal (i.e., births, sales, deaths, movements to fairs or expositions and home again, etc.). The stated purpose of the systems is to avoid or mitigate the disruptions in international trade that may arise from incidents of animal diseases, e.g., “mad cow” disease or foot-and-mouth disease. But the actual effect is to consolidate corporate control over the food supply and force simple rural people into endless payment of fees to these corporate masters. The principal proponents of these systems have been, not surprisingly, (1) multinational meat and dairy corporations that are dependent upon an ever-increasing global trade; (2) corporations producing the required and costly radio-frequency identification infrastructure; and (3) the government agricultural bureaucracies of those highly-developed nations that can most easily accommodate the enormous technological infrastructure required by such systems, and can therefore use the systems as a trade weapon against the developing world. Although rural peoples have been putting up a brave resistance to these livestock tracking systems, they often have been overwhelmed by the political influence of multinational corporations. Unfortunately, the politically dominant urban and suburban populations of developed countries have thus far shown little interest in the problems created for their rural fellow citizens by animal ID systems. Therefore it has been difficult to bring the problem to the attention of the media or of more reform-minded politicians.

Many traditional rural cultures, even those of developed countries but especially those in the developing world, will not survive the worldwide imposition of these systems. The required electronic tags and readers are far too expensive for small-scale operations or for the home raising of livestock. Rural locations in developing nations and

even in the developed world lack (and *do not want*) the infrastructure – electricity, rapid internet connectivity, computer availability – required for these systems. And most importantly, these totally centralized, technology-dependent, and corporate-dominated systems are contrary to the core rural values of localization, simplicity, and personal autonomy and freedom. Should such systems become required under penalty of law worldwide – as they already are required in the European Union, Canada, Australia and in several parts of the United States – these systems effectively could efface the small-scale private keeping of livestock that has been the basis of human rural culture for ten millennia.

II. Urbanization and the Decline of Rural Life

Urbanization, the displacement of rural peoples into cities, was prerequisite to the industrialization of Europe and North America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Corporate industrial businesses require centralized labor pools and a centralized captive market for their products. In developed nations the urban population exceeded the rural population by the middle of the twentieth century and the trend has continued. In less developed nations, the migration into urban areas has occurred over the last few decades and is projected to greatly accelerate in the immediate future.

The consequences are clear. Urban people become unable to fulfill their own needs for food and become dependent upon food produced elsewhere. Urban corporate culture depends upon enormous amounts of outside energy inputs for both business and home use. When politicians must serve primarily urban demands, rural concerns are ignored. Urban people are more distant from and therefore less cognizant of the health and needs of the natural world and ecosystems. Agriculture is converted from an honorable, productive, independent and rewarding lifeway, into “agribusiness” – mechanized, driven (and corrupted) by profit, unattached to natural systems, viewing livestock as mere production units and imposing the odious “factory farm” model. The urban population becomes “consumers,” forced to purchase at first all basic needs and subsequently, the false consumerist “needs” created by the corporate system. Urban people become unaware of the methods used to produce their food and uncaring about the

negative ecological, animal-welfare, and social costs of the industrial agricultural systems upon which they have become abjectly dependent.

An urban culture's uneasy relation to its food sources and its agriculture leads to an undue preoccupation with "food safety" and sanitation. When your food production is completely beyond your control and even beyond your knowledge and understanding, occasional episodes of food-borne illnesses seem more frightening than the facts would warrant. The very minute statistical risks of food-borne illnesses are forgotten because of the entire dependency of urban people on others for their food. When you take no part in food production, not only are you unaware of the true resilience of natural systems – including the human immune system; but you are also likely to feel that you are powerless to ensure the safety of your own food. In addition, the consolidation of farming results in huge production, processing, and distribution facilities that spread a problem of food-borne illness over a much wider geographical area and a much larger number of people, than would be affected in a more localized food system.

In the early years of government regulation of food production, large agribusinesses and food companies resisted regulation. However, once regulation became an entrenched system, corporate food producers and processors realized that ever-increasing regulations could be used to eliminate small competitors and thus consolidate food production in the hands of the few largest firms. Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we see powerful agribusiness promoting systems of an insane degree of regulatory intrusion and complexity. Only very large firms can comply with these complex and expensive regulatory systems and therefore, small and independent food producers disappear. Examples of such anti-small producer sanitation schemes include food irradiation, so-called "Good Agricultural Practices" for produce (requiring complex redundant cleaning of product with toxic chemicals, exclusion of all wildlife and domestic animals from growing areas, expensive sanitation equipment); and our main subject here, national animal identification systems (requiring submission to extreme government control of one's livelihood, acquisition of expensive technological equipment, and capitulation to a belief system that relegates the natural world to nothing more than a collection of resources to be exploited for human over-consumption and greed).

Lest there be any doubt that ongoing urbanization threatens the integrity and viability of rural cultures and rural peoples, consider several contemporary examples. Indigenous peoples in Brazil are being displaced by the continual growth of industrial farming, manufacturing, and energy projects for an increasingly urbanized society. Tribes living in the area of the Xingu River successfully fought proposals for dams in 1989, but now they face the threat again. Brazil plans to build a hydroelectric dam near the mouth of the Xingu; the dam would flood some 100,000 acres and destroy the way of life of indigenous peoples throughout the area. The indigenous peoples gathered for a protest against the dam project in May 2008. The tribes view this as a fight for their survival. Past dam projects in other areas have destroyed large areas of forests, altered river flows, and polluted water sources vital to the area residents' culture and health. The indigenous peoples see their mission as not only preserving their way of life, but also as the only means of safeguarding the integrity of nature. [2] These peoples are desperately defending their autonomy, their culture, and the lands necessary for their survival, but industrial society will not cease its assaults on their lands and their way of life.

Traditional Tibetan herders in western China are victims of a government-sponsored cultural genocide, an official government policy designed to eradicate their way of life. Global warming, urbanization, and industrialization have eliminated or diverted much of the water that formerly replenished remote grazing lands. Perversely, urbanizing and industrializing China now blames the herders for "overgrazing" and depleting their grasslands. The Chinese government could work to remedy the environmental destruction of water resources caused by industrialization. But instead, China promotes a policy of removing the herders from their ancestral lands. Beginning in 2000, the Chinese government has forcibly relocated the formerly nomadic Tibetan herders into urban-style settlement camps. The herders' livestock is slaughtered and these traditional people are left without any viable means of self-sufficiency. Chinese government officials claim that their objective is to "develop," "civilize," and "modernize" these herders and their surroundings. However, many human rights advocates believe that China's true motive is to suppress Tibetan culture and any resistance to Chinese political and social domination. Moreover, even taking the Chinese claims at face value, what benefit is there for these people in any more "development" or

“modernization”? If the Tibetan herders are peaceable and contented in living their low-input, low-consumption way of life, why should urban bureaucrats force them into the mold of modernity? The Tibetan pastoralists’ simple lifeways should be preserved and protected as a model of anti-consumerist values. Instead, their culture, dependent upon nomadic herding, is on the verge of being lost forever. [3]

Nor is the suppression of traditional rural cultures confined to developing countries. It occurs with as much virulence in North America and the European Union, because these areas have even more entrenched urban-majority populations. In North America, the rural landscape falls victim to ever more ecologically damaging projects of “alternative energy” – the visual and aural blight of enormous wind farms and huge expanses of industrial solar-panel arrays. Small individual home power sources, including wind and solar where appropriate, would not have these negative environmental effects, and would be far more effective because they would eliminate the power loss inherent in transmission. But government policymakers under the control of energy-industry lobbyists will not consider any such system that would allow for household power generation independent of corporate suppliers. In an even more ecologically destructive development, volatile energy supplies and prices have provoked a surge in actual and proposed projects of shale-oil and tar-sands development, coal mountaintop removal, ethanol plants requiring vast amounts of water, and nuclear waste storage facilities. Where rural people once were at least able to enjoy peaceful and beautiful surroundings, now industrial energy and agribusiness projects threaten those amenities throughout North America.

As the European Union spreads its influence ever more widely and annexes more and more formerly independent countries, it brings the destruction of small traditional farming in its wake. A clear example has occurred in Poland. Poland became part of the EU in 2006 and in just a few short years its traditional small agriculture has been devastated. Before EU accession, Polish small farmers raised, butchered, and sold their own meat animals and often hand-milked just a few cows, contributing the milk to small-scale, localized collection systems for processing and distribution. This resilient local system has been ended by excessive EU “sanitation” and “food safety” requirements. These requirements are designed so that only large and well-funded businesses can

possibly comply with them. In recent years American pork-production giant Smithfield Farms has established huge swine factory farms in Poland and has driven down the price of pork to the point that small pig farmers have been ruined. The small farmers can no longer market meats butchered on the farm or milk produced from very small herds. EU bureaucrats scold that these small farmers must wake up to the demands of “modern business” and should take advantage of potential EU subsidies to install modern systems and equipment. What the EU fails to comprehend is that the Polish farmers were content and happy with their simple and small-scale way of life. They do not want to be big businesses. They do not want subsidies. They do not want the burdens of complex machinery and technologies. They want their rural culture and way of life back. [4] The heartbreaking plight of Polish farmers is fairly well publicized but similar devastations of independent small agriculture have undoubtedly occurred in other recent EU accession countries, such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Romania.

III. A Global Food Crisis: The Predictable Result of Urbanization and Global Corporate Food Systems

In early 2008 we faced a global food crisis – the price of commodity foods had risen so dramatically, and at times their supply had become so constrained, that popular demonstrations and even food riots occurred in many countries, including Egypt, Mexico, the Philippines, Italy, and Haiti. Developed nations suddenly realized that the number of people in danger of hunger or even starvation had increased by 75 million. [5] The developed world had smugly assumed that it could manage and control the world’s food supply in such a way as to eradicate hunger within a few decades. Now that assumption is proven tragically false.

An era of looming global food shortages is no time to drive small farmers out of business and discourage new entrants from small-scale farming. Yet the agricultural policies designed by rich nations and powerful multinational agribusiness and food corporations inevitably burden and ultimately suppress small farming. The intended proliferation of government livestock registries and tracking is particularly likely to oppress and subvert the household and small commercial raising of livestock.

How could developed nations have been caught unaware by food shortages? For decades engineers and environmentalists have predicted that the widespread availability of cheap petroleum soon would come to an end. [6] The industrial commodity food system is completely dependent upon petroleum and natural gas -- for powering equipment, manufacturing conventional fertilizers, and transporting vast quantities of goods – grains, produce, meat, and dairy products – from one region of the world to another. Meanwhile developed nations and many international organizations ignore the unrelenting growth of the human population. In early 2009 we have a world human population of nearly 6.8 billion. It was only a decade ago, in 1999, that we passed the 6 billion mark; we since have added more than 12% to the human population. To further put this in perspective, in 1965, only 44 years ago, world population was less than half what it is today. [7] No sensible person would imagine that, in an age of increasing energy scarcity, world industrial food production can keep growing on a trajectory to fulfill the ever increasing food needs of this ever growing population.

The developed world has done its best to “blame” the global food crisis on the world’s poor and on developing nations. However, the points made by the developed world in this regard are unsupportable. Media coverage of the global food crisis dutifully repeated that a main cause of the crisis was increased food consumption by India and China, especially increased consumption of meat and dairy products whose production demands large amounts of commodity grain. However, these claims of increased consumption in India and China are simply untrue. Over the last 17 years, Indian food availability per person has declined by 15%. [8] And, according to an American researcher, since 1990, although China’s consumption of meat has grown, China has met nearly all its increased demand for meat, as well as its increased demands for rice and corn, from its domestic production. [9] Although developed-world interests effectively may have misled the media into blaming India and China for the recent food shortages, India and China simply are not to blame.

Representatives of dominant powers also claimed that developing nations were “hoarding” grains and therefore disrupting world supplies. [10] If world supplies are so easily disrupted by countries trying to assure food for their own people, surely it is the world system of industrial agriculture that is to blame. The very concept of allowing a

handful of agriculturally dominant firms and nations to make the rest of the world dependent upon them is fraught with the likelihood of tragedy and disaster. As a counterweight to the insecurity of food dependency, we must recognize the inalienable right of food sovereignty. If, say, India wants to assure a supply of rice for its own population, it has every right to store grain to assure domestic needs first, and limit exports to whatever production may exceed the domestic needs. This principle should also obtain on the more local level— it is immoral for anyone to demand that a region, town, or even a family must surrender the supply of food it may have produced for its own needs. Rather than rail against self-sufficiency and food sovereignty as “hoarding,” the developed world should adopt a principle of fostering every nation to produce, and retain, as much of its own food supply as possible.

IV. Government Animal Tracking Demands and the Demise of Rural Culture

Even in the developed nations and more advanced developing nations that have thus far instituted animal-tracking systems, we already see much evidence of damage to rural livelihoods and culture. For example, in the European Union, the requirements of animal-tracking have become more and more onerous and demanding over time. At first, common printed tags were sufficient and animals did not need to be tagged until leaving their birth farm. However, this quickly became a requirement for RFID tags and a requirement that young stock be tagged within 10 days of birth. More recently, controversy has centered on the fact that the EU now wants to impose double RFID tagging of all sheep. Scottish sheep producers, in particular, are strenuously resisting this requirement because it is not at all compatible with their open-range style of sheep raising. It would be nearly impossible for them to perform the required tagging within the required time frame. And since profit margins on sheep are notoriously narrow, Scottish sheep producers will not be economically viable if the EU ID regime is fully imposed and many will have to abandon farming. [11]

In Australia the livestock ID system has been a notorious mess and it continues to face strong resistance from farmers. Millions of cattle are unaccounted for in the supposedly “complete” national cattle database. Failures of the electronic system to

correctly reflect new cattle and to remove slaughtered cattle from the database run as high as 20 to 25 percent. [12] These failures of the Australian system are not just abstract problems – they can affect the daily lives and livelihoods of all rural livestock owners. For example, one cattle man was prosecuted and fined after he had moved 80 head of cattle to new pasture because of drought conditions. His offense? He moved the cattle before having placed the required RFID identification tags on them. There was no disease problem, no change of ownership, no entry of meat into the food chain – nothing but a technical violation of an arbitrary rule. Such incidents well illustrate the interference in normal daily rural life, and the expense in both time and money, that is placed upon rural peoples by these detailed mandatory identification systems.

Some of the most severe consequences of the international tagging regime have fallen upon Brazilian farmers. Since Brazil exports a significant amount of beef to the European Union, the EU, after establishing its own cattle tracking program, quickly demanded that Brazil also adopt a program. We can see from what ensued how livestock tracking – contrary to the “seamless commerce” claims of its proponents – pits nation against nation and farmer against farmer. EU beef producers, wishing to protect their home market, constantly complained that Brazil’s tracing system was less complete than the EU system and therefore demanded that Brazilian imports be curtailed. [14] The Brazilian government and Brazilian farmers were required to submit to an extensive examination by EU inspectors, who scrutinized all aspects of the Brazilian livestock traceability system. Not surprisingly, the EU inspectors found that the Brazilian system was not as thorough as the EU’s own system. This resulted in drastic curtailment of Brazilian beef exports to the EU – only a handful of the most sophisticated Brazilian operators were deemed worthy to export to the EU. [15]

It goes without saying that less wealthy nations can never aspire to complete equality with Europe, North America, or Australia if export markets for agricultural products become completely dependent upon expensive high-technology tracking systems. If even Brazil, a country with an advanced agricultural sector, cannot readily meet the EU standards, are the poorer developing nations to be forever excluded from commerce on an equal footing? And what about the effects of these traceability systems on domestic food production? Will the EU and other wealthy importing areas demand

that poorer countries burden even their subsistence-farming rural populations with costly electronic “animal traceability systems”? Such an impending danger to the food independence of global rural peoples is not mere conjecture – the EU and Australia already require even non-commercial, household livestock to be fully registered in their systems, and warn of enforcement actions against non-compliant owners.

New Zealand is the next target for the expansion of animal tracking systems. The New Zealand government and multinational food production firms would like to impose the system by 2010. However, New Zealand’s farmers are putting up a very strong resistance to animal tracking, having witnessed the difficulties such systems have caused for farmers in other countries. The technique being used to force the system in New Zealand is one of divide-and-conquer. The system is at first proposed to apply only to cattle owners. Even though New Zealand is a significant producer of sheep, sheep are being left out of the planned system at present. Thus, farmers are less motivated to present a united front to stop the system. Sheep producers have no present incentive to assist cattle owners in resisting the system. If the system is imposed on cattle owners first, the cattle owners would then have little incentive to help sheep producers resist inclusion in the future. [16]

V. A Better Way

Although the large firms engaged in cross border agricultural trade and in manufacture of tracking-systems equipment have influenced several governments to adopt mandatory animal ID over the past decade, farmers continue to resist these systems and to rebel against such intense bureaucratic intrusion in their lives. As of early 2009, farmers in the United States and in New Zealand have been opposing mandatory animal tracking for several years, and the fate of proposed mandatory systems in those countries remains uncertain. These resistance movements are of great significance to the global community of rural peoples. If mandatory government livestock tracking can be defeated in such significant livestock-producing countries as the United States and New Zealand, not only will there be hope for stopping the further proliferation of these systems, but it

may well become more feasible for livestock owners in Australia and the EU to achieve rollbacks of their own systems.

Farmers worldwide, instead of sowing enmity by complaining about other farmers' degrees of traceability, should instead band together in solidarity to put an end to the absurdities of these ever-expanding "traceability" systems. Those who wish to profit from international trade in livestock products should fund their own private systems of identification or traceability, if they consider it worthwhile. Administering such systems for the benefit of transnational agribusiness is not a proper role of government. Such systems should never be applied to farmers who market only locally within their own regions or to rural householders raising food for their own use. If we can free local-scale farmers from such intrusive systems of government and corporate oversight, then, and only then, can we expect increasing numbers of young people to take up livelihoods in farming and re-create the secure community food systems that we once had, and that we need to rebuild for the future.

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