

Feds ask, "Are the Big 6 too big?"

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Eighteen months ago, PAN's Dr. Marcia Ishii-Eiteman [testified](#) at the historic USDA and Dept. of Justice (DOJ) joint hearings on corporate control and competition in agriculture. The hearings were attended by thousands of farmers, ranchers and civil society organizations from across the country, with particularly strong participation in the heartland states.

Then last year many of you joined PAN in [urging the DOJ](#) to release a final report about those workshops, and make firm commitments to next steps. The agency has finally [delivered](#) — sort of.

Key report findings

DOJ identified nine key areas of concern, including anticompetitive mergers (ever wonder [how the Big 6 became the Big 6?](#)), high market concentration, and genetically modified seeds. Even DOJ officials had to [admit](#) that "vigorous antitrust enforcement is imperative" in today's consolidated ag sector. Report authors added that the agency is

. . . committed to taking all appropriate investigatory and enforcement action against conduct threatening harm to competition in agricultural markets.

Unfortunately, this promise remains to be fulfilled, as three of the key players who were poised to act have left their posts: Christine Varney (then Assistant Attorney General and a core leader in the hearings), Philip Weiser (then Deputy Assistant Attorney General, DOJ Antitrust Division) and J. Dudley Butler (then Administrator of the Grain Inspection and Packers and Stockyards Administration).

All three have since resigned their positions, leaving lukewarm leadership that hasn't yet done anything substantive to prove their "commitment." While an investigation into anticompetitive practices in the seed industry — specifically in reference to Monsanto — is (supposedly) moving forward, PAN's many phone calls to DOJ offices gleaned nothing more conclusive than confirmation that "the investigation is ongoing."

Shining a light on corporate power

The diverse experiences and testimonies of participants essentially pointed in one direction. One

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speaker in Alabama [summed it up](#) this way in May 2010:

...lack of antitrust enforcement in recent decades [has resulted in] a severely concentrated marketplace in which power and profit are limited to a few at the expense of countless, hard working family farmers.

As PAN members know, nowhere is this more true than in the agricultural input market, where [the Big 6](#) pesticide corporations control upwards of 75% of the global market for pesticides and genetically engineered seeds, and routinely wield their enormous financial and political power to dictate, undermine and subvert [public policy & competitive markets](#).

Despite industry presence at the hearings, the evidence of corporate control was overwhelmingly damning.

What now?

The hearings were an important landmark in our movement, in that they brought together diverse communities — from Coastal urban eaters to Midwestern poultry growers and hog farmers — to share common concerns and lay the groundwork for concerted action.

The real work, however, remains to be done. And what happens next will rest largely on how much and how effectively we are able to press these offices — and the newly established [Agriculture Competition Joint Task Force](#), formed during the hearings themselves — to fulfill their promises to farmers, eaters and the entire PAN community.

We hope you will stay with us as we continue to build on the process started by these workshops, and work towards [food democracy](#) for all.

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