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Agriculture: Farmers, Agrifood Industry, Scientists, and Consumers

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AGRICULTURE: FARMERS, AGRIFOOD INDUSTRY, SCIENTISTS, AND CONSUMERS

Dirk Barrett
Introduction

MR. BARRETT: It seems like people are cutting class on Saturday afternoon. Maybe I should call on some of the students and embarrass them.

My name is Dirk Barrett. I am in the Legal Department of Pfizer, the drug company in New York.

The subject is agriculture. We have a, still have a small business of selling products to farmers. It is smaller than it used to be because of controls on antibiotics and feeds. And I do not know too much about the field. I have observed, and it is often been pointed out to me, that it is a tough business because it is just very hard to make any money selling to farmers.

You cannot sell them a product unless you can persuade them that it is going to directly contribute to their bottom line. So it is not so much about keeping their favorite cow, Bessy, alive. It is just about getting things to the marketplace.

With a different focus, I will observe the changes, the hallmark of our times, and change that is proceeding at an ever accelerating rate. The social, cultural, political, and economic changes that go on around us all the time give our era a sense of excitement and new opportunity, but also lead to feeling of loss of control to anxiety and fear as some changes are harmful to some people, at least in the short-term, and to a feeling of regret for what has been lost and may be lost in the future.

In the field that we are talking about in this conference, which is essentially that of economics and the attendant legal and public policy issues, there are at least three forces driving that change.

The first is the continuing advance of technology. This leads to not only a greater variety of products and services being made available at a lower cost, but in the case of information technology, leads to great advances and access to information and to Intercon activity, even on an international scale. In the field of agriculture, it has led to increased productivity and the development of plant species and plants with characteristics that do not exist in those plants in nature, which is a troubling circumstance to some people.

The second force is the continuing advance of market economics and free trade. While regulation has not disappeared, and in some realms may be advancing, and the role of the state remains considerable, and will not disappear. The advantages in productivity and innovation produced by free mar-

kets continue to be acknowledged. And free market economics, despite some critics, continues to take hold of a developing world. And in some places, such as China, is affecting an economic revolution.

The third force, globalization, is in some ways a result of the first two factors. The term globalization is perhaps just a shorthand way of saying that more and more economic actors, not just multinationals, but also, for example, software engineers in India, are acting on a world scale, in that their target market is the world.

The ability of these actors to operate on a world-wide basis is magnified by technology, particularly information technology. All these forces affect the field of agriculture, no less than any other sector.

To discuss where some of these changes have left us in the field of agricultural trade and public policy, we have two distinguished economists with a long experience in this field.

On the Canadian side is Peter Phillips. He's an agricultural economist with particular focus on intellectual property, biotechnology and trade issues. He was, before 1997, the Assistant Deputy Minister for policy with Saskatchewan Economic Development. And he's worked extensively on the subject of genetically modified food, which is a field where law, economics, ethics and trade come together. He's presently at the University of Saskatchewan, where he is the Chair of Managing Knowledge-based Agri-food Development and the Director of College of Biotechnology.

On the U.S. side, Audra Erickson, interestingly for this conference, was educated in Canada, earning an MA in economics from McGill. She has served in government in the U.S. Trade Representative Office advising on agricultural trade, and the Department of Agriculture working on trade and environmental issues.

In the private sector, she has worked with the Farm Bureau Federation. She is worked with organizations seeking to open markets for the U.S agricultural industry, such as the Ag Trade Coalition and the American Farm Bureau Federation, where she was Senior Director of Congressional Relations. Currently, she is the President of the Corn Refiners Association. So we are pleased to welcome Miss Erickson.