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80 Groups And 38,000+ Individuals Unite Against Siddiqui Nomination

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Groups Call for Change to Failed Free Trade Agenda That Has Deepened Global Food, Environmental and Health Crises

San Francisco, CA, Apopka, FL, Washington D.C. (November 2, 2009) – In an unprecedented effort to block a USTR agriculture nominee, 80 groups sent a letter today to Chairman Max Baucus and Ranking Member Charles Grassley of the Senate Finance Committee urging the rejection of Islam Siddiqui as Chief Agriculture Negotiator at the office of the United States Trade Representative. In part to counter a supportive letter previously issued by over 40 agribusiness industry groups, the NGO letter protests Siddiqui's clear affiliation with the agricultural input industry and its "free" trade agenda. Siddiqui is a former pesticide/biotech lobbyist for and current vice president of regulatory affairs at CropLife America. His nomination will be taken up by the Committee on November 4.

The NGO groups -- representing environmental, consumer, anti-hunger, family farm, farmworker, fishing, sustainable agriculture, public health and other advocacy organizations -- oppose Siddiqui on the grounds of controversial positions taken while he was at USDA and employed as a CropLife America lobbyist. Over the weekend, a parallel groundswell of over 38,000 concerned individuals have also signed a petition to President Obama, urging him to reconsider recent industry-friendly appointments to key government agriculture posts, including Siddiqui.

In addition to opposing Siddiqui's nomination on the basis that it appears to be a textbook case of the "revolving door" between industry and government, both the NGO letter and the citizen petition cite Siddiqui's record and CropLife America's behavior as cause for concern.

- Siddiqui's statements demonstrate a disturbing disregard for allowing countries to exercise the "precautionary principle" in regulating genetically modified crops.
- While at USDA, Siddiqui oversaw the controversial release of the first proposed organic standards that would have allowed toxic sludge, genetically modified and irradiated food to be labeled "organic."
- CropLife America has consistently lobbied the U.S. government to weaken and thwart international treaties governing the use and export of toxic chemicals such as PCBs, DDT and dioxins.
- CropLife America's regional partner notoriously "shuddered" at Michelle Obama's organic White House garden, and launched a letter-writing campaign urging the First Lady to use chemical pesticides.

Dena Hoff, a Montana farmer and vice-president of the National Family Farm Coalition, said, "We have a food crisis, water crisis, climate crisis, all of which have been exacerbated by our trade agreements and the World Trade Organization continuing to push failed chemical-intensive and biotech solutions. We believe the United States can do better than nominating a former pesticide lobbyist to this key position. While I have been heartened by Michelle Obama's campaign to recognize the importance of local, sustainable and healthy food, the White House has severely undermined their credibility with this nomination." Hoff noted that U.S. family farmers failed to benefit from GMOs, commenting, "CropLife America's members, including Monsanto, DuPont, Dow and Syngenta, force farmers to rely on expensive inputs and go into deeper debt. They also threaten the biodiversity needed to sustain our planet with their monoculture industrial model."

Dr. Marcia Ishii-Eiteman, senior scientist at Pesticide Action Network, noted Siddiqui's appointment advances an agenda that undermines developing countries' capacity to feed themselves. She explains, "Over one billion people do not have enough to eat. If we want to feed a growing planet, we will have to change the way we farm in ways that run directly counter to CropLife America's agenda. This is because industrial agriculture isn't feeding the world now and science tells us that more of the same won't help. Rather, the most comprehensive analysis of global agriculture to date, the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) states unequivocally that 'business as usual is not an option.' We urgently need to invest in agroecological methods that regenerate soil health, sequester carbon and put profits back in the hands of farmers and rural communities. Siddiqui's record represents neither the change we need, nor change we can believe in."

Ian Illuminato of Friends of the Earth urged the Senate to vote down the nomination and said, "Senators should consider the message they would send by making a pesticide industry lobbyist our country's chief agricultural trade negotiator, creating at least the appearance of a conflict of interest. Islam Siddiqui has a record of siding with industry at the expense of human health protections. That's not the sort of record that should lead to an appointment as a top government official, much less to a position that plays a major role in protecting the safety of our food. We urge senators to reject his nomination."

The groups signing the letter include new voices that have not previously been involved with trade battles. Robyn O'Brien, founder of AllergyKids and acclaimed author of *The Unhealthy Truth: How Our Food is Making Us Sick and What We Can Do About It*, said, "As a

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mother, I have devoted my time to investigating the skyrocketing cases of autism, diabetes, cancer and allergies among our nation's children. A growing body of scientific evidence supports the theory that chemicals in our food are increasingly linked to the rise in health problems with our children. I strongly disapprove of appointing an industry lobbyist to export our failing food system and its genetically modified crops full of novel proteins, allergens and toxins to the rest of the world in the interests of agrochemical corporations. All children, no matter where they come from, deserve to eat safe, nutritious food."

Farmworker advocates expressed similar fears about Siddiqui's nomination, noting that farmworkers and their families suffer most directly from pesticide chemical use. Tirso Moreno, general coordinator for Farmworker Association of Florida, said, "Siddiqui's former employer has continually blocked international attempts to help us regulate pesticides that are causing chronic skin and respiratory problems, birth defects and cancer in our community. Now Siddiqui will be pushing for the elimination of trade barriers to get developing countries to accept our agribusiness' toxic chemicals. For the health of farmworkers around the world, we urge that his nomination be rejected."

Resources:

NGO letter to the Senate Finance Committee: <http://www.panna.org/files/FINAL-Finance Letter-Siddiqui.pdf>

Individual petition: http://action.panna.org/t/5185/petition.jsp?petition_KEY=2150

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