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national farmers union
In Union Is Strength

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**APRIL 17, 'INTERNATIONAL DAY OF FARMERS' STRUGGLE':
2003 SIGNIFICANT YEAR IN STRUCTURING GLOBAL FOOD TRADE**

SASKATOON, Sask.—2003 will be a pivotal year for farmers and the global food trade. Farmers in Mexico launched the year with protests drawing attention to cheap food flooding into that country and to the devastating effects on farmers. In February, the World Trade Organization (WTO) released the controversial “Harbinson Draft” proposals to restructure world agricultural production and trade. In March and April, farm organizations around the world spoke out against the destructive measures proposed by Harbinson. And, in September, government and corporate leaders will gather in Cancun, Mexico to attempt to negotiate new rules for global agriculture and trade at the WTO Ministerial meetings.

NFU former-President (and Via Campesina North America Coordinator) Nettie Wiebe recently met with farm organizations and NGOs in Geneva in preparation for the fall WTO talks. NFU current President Stewart Wells has had conversations with Canadian trade officials and has recently written to the Canadian government objecting to the anti-farmer measures proposed by WTO Agriculture negotiations’ chairperson Stuart Harbinson. The NFU will send a delegation to Cancun in September to protest against the WTO’s destructive effects on the world’s farmers.

April 17 is the International Day of Farmers’ Struggle. The NFU is working with farm organizations around the world through the international organization Via Campesina (please see backgrounder) to draw attention to the global crisis in agriculture and to create a unified response to the WTO and the corporate global agenda.

Farmers from around the world will be protesting in Cancun in September. For Mexican farmers hard hit by cheap grain and meat from Canada and the U.S., the protests have already started. In the wake of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Mexico has moved from self-sufficiency in basic grains to importing 95% of its required soybeans, 50% of its rice, 49% of its wheat, and 40% of its meat. The loss of these domestic markets has driven millions of farmers off the land and increased poverty—an estimated 75% of rural Mexicans now live in poverty, and over half are in extreme poverty. Mexican farmers blocked roads and border points in January and February this year to protest the destruction of their farm sector.

In Canada, farmers have been similarly hard hit: losing their grain handling and dairy co-ops, watching as foreign transnationals take over our food processing companies, and struggling in the worst farm income crisis since the 1930s. Canada has lost over 12% of its farmers in the past decade. All this economic pain and dislocation comes despite a tripling of food exports since we implemented the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement in 1989.

“It is a statement of the painfully obvious to note that farmers around the world have suffered and disappeared as a result of trade agreements and globalized food markets, and that transnational agribusiness corporations have increased their profits and their size as a result of these same agreements,” said Via Campesina North America Coordinator Nettie Wiebe. She continued: “The farmers of the world are banding together through the Via Campesina to stop the destructive WTO process and to advance more just alternatives.”

For more information, please see the NFU’s brief on trade and the farm crisis: *The Farm Crisis, EU Subsidies, and Agribusiness Market Power* (February 17, 2000); *Record-High Fertilizer and Diesel Fuel Prices and their Relation to the Farm Income Crisis* (June 27, 2001); *Farmers’ Opposition to Corporate Globalization and Trade Agreements* (March 2, 2002); and *Free Trade: Is it working for farmers?* (August 6, 2002). All are available at the NFU website (www.nfu.ca).

For more information on the Via Campesina and on April 17, please see backgrounder.

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Backgrounder to the NFU's April 17th news release

April 17th : International Day of Farmers' Struggle

The Vía Campesina has declared April 17th of each year as the “International Day of Farmers' Struggle” in commemoration of the killing of 19 peasants in Northern state of Para, Brazil, that occurred on April 17th, 1996. Since then, farmers and peasants around the world join together on April 17th to focus the world's attention on the situation of rural people.

What is the Vía Campesina?

The Vía Campesina is a global farm movement that brings together organizations of peasants, small and medium-sized farmers, rural women, farm workers and indigenous agrarian communities in Asia, the Americas and Europe. Africa is working to establish a pan-African network that will then join the Vía Campesina. Since the Vía Campesina was formed in 1993, it has experienced rapid growth, making it perhaps the largest rural social movement to have emerged in recent times. Currently, 82 farm organizations representing millions of farming families from 47 countries belong to the Vía Campesina.

Why was the Vía Campesina formed?

When the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) concluded, farm organizations had already had years of experience with structural adjustment programs and regional trade agreements. Liberalization in agriculture had wreaked havoc on rural communities and the environment. Farming families and whole rural communities were “disappeared” as they could no longer make a living by growing food. Many farm leaders believed that the WTO and the Agreement on Agriculture would only make the situation worse.

Because agricultural policy is defined more and more at the international level, farm leaders are forging alliances with like-minded organizations around the world. The Vía Campesina emerged in direct opposition to the globalization of an industrialized and liberalized model of agriculture promoted by the WTO and regional free trade agreements. By forming the Vía Campesina, progressive farm leaders gathered together to build an alternative model of agriculture. In that alternative model, agriculture is farmer-driven, is based on peasant and small-holder production, and plays an important social function while at the same time being economically viable, socially just and ecologically sustainable.

What does the Vía Campesina do?

The main goal of the Vía Campesina is to build an alternative model of agriculture. To reach this goal, Vía Campesina organizations from around the world work together to develop and implement farmer-based policies for sustainable food production, fair trade and food sovereignty. For the Vía Campesina working together means:

- Building solidarity and unity among farm organizations;
- Strengthening the participation of women at all levels of farm organizations;
- Organizing exchanges and developing linkages among farm organizations; and
- Engaging in collective action.

The core issues that the Vía Campesina is now working on are:

- Food Sovereignty and Agricultural Trade;
- Genetic Resources, Biodiversity and Farmers' Rights;
- Agrarian Reform;
- Human Rights and Solidarity;
- Gender and rural development;
- Farmworkers' rights;
- Migration; and
- Alternative agriculture.

Vía Campesina structure and representation

An International Coordinating Commission (ICC) of 14—with two representatives (one man and one woman) of peasant and farm organizations from each of the seven Vía Campesina regions—is the most important link among the various peasant organizations. The seven regions and the Regional Coordinators of the Vía Campesina are:

- **South Asia:** Karnataka State Farmers Association (KRRS), India.
- **Southeast and Northeast Asia:** Federation of Peasant Organizations of Indonesia (FSPI), Indonesia.
- **Western and Eastern Europe:** Coordination Paysanne Européenne (CPE), Europe.
- **North America:** National Farmers Union (NFU), Canada; Union Nacional de Organizaciones Regionales Campesinas Autonomas (UNORCA), Mexico.
- **Central America:** Asociación de Organizaciones Campesinas Centroamericanas para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo (ASOCODE); Belize Association of Producer Organization (BAPO).
- **Caribbean:** Asociación Nacional de Agricultores Pequeños (ANAP), Cuba; Winward Islands Farmers Association (WINFA)
- **South America:** Movimento de Trabalhadores sem Terra (MST), Brazil; Asociación Nacional de Mujeres Rurales e Indígenas (ANAMURI), Chile