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Report: Free Trade Threatens Small Farmers

By MICHAEL CASEY, Associated Press Writer *Thu Dec 8, 5:58 AM ET*

Lifting trade barriers is threatening the livelihoods of small-scale farmers and fisherman and contributing to desertification in Africa, the environmental group Friends of the Earth said in a report released Thursday.

The report, "The Tyranny of Free Trade," released just days before the start of the Dec. 13-18 World Trade Organization summit in Hong Kong, said free trade policies tend to benefit large, export-driven producers, drive down prices and hurt smaller producers.

In its 36-page report, the Netherlands-based organization gave examples of how free trade policies had hurt workers and the environment from Denmark to Indonesia.

Small-scale farmers are particularly vulnerable to market opening pressures and often forced from their land when it is converted to plantations or planted with crops for export, it said. The adoption of export-led agriculture as promoted by the WTO, the report said, is increased desertification on the edges of Ghana's savannah forests.

The WTO says that liberalizing trade helps alleviate poverty, but many civil society groups, including Friends of the Earth, believe the 148-member body favors the interests of major corporations and rich countries.

"The myth of unfettered free trade as a solution to poverty needs to be exploded," said one of the report's authors, Ronnie Hall of Friends of the Earth International. "What we need now is a halt to trade liberalization negotiations and an urgent review of the impacts of international trade rules on the impoverished and the environment."

The report said that 40 million small-scale fishermen from the Philippines to the Seychelles could be driven out of business and fishing stocks further depleted if the WTO treaty requires cuts in fish import tariffs, which protect small-scale fishermen.

"The proposed tariff reductions in the Non-Agriculture Market Access (NAMA) negotiations will increase incentives to fish internationally, especially with large commercial trawlers in turn fueling further exploitation," the report said.

The environment group also warned that proposed trade rules could limit policies aimed at supporting sustainable industries and prompt governments to abandon laws or regulations aimed at reducing dependence on fossil fuels.

The report also said proposed tariff reductions could fuel a rise of illegal logging in countries like Indonesia.

Talks ahead of the WTO summit have reached an impasse over agriculture, with many negotiators blaming Europe's unwillingness to further cut farm subsidies and tariffs.

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