

# Jerry Hagstrom



## Rethinking trade committees

MORE THAN 40 PERCENT of the people sitting on the committees that advise U.S. government officials on trade matters represent food, agriculture, and related industries, according to a study released this week.

Being that these industries make up only 5.4 percent of the U.S. gross domestic product, should this be considered an accomplishment by an industry that punches above its weight? Or are agriculture and food “overrepresented,” as Lori Wallach, a longtime trade critic, writes in a new study entitled “Loaded: Corporate Interests Dominate the Official Government Trade Advisory System.”

Wallach’s statement about agriculture is part of a larger critique of the advisory system, which includes 27 committees that are mainly organized by issue or sector, with 15 industry trade-advisory committees jointly administered by the Office of the United States Trade Representative and the Commerce Department, and six agricultural technical advisory committees for trade jointly administered by USTR and the Agriculture Department.

The 479 advisers who sit on the committees must undergo security clearances before they get access to classified U.S. trade texts and what Wallach calls “secretive processes.” According to the study, 401 of the advisers represent corporations, corporate trade associations, small and medium-sized enterprises, agribusiness-promotion boards, and professional trade associations. Sixty-nine percent of the advisers represent large corporations and corporate trade associations.

“The combination of extreme secrecy and this corporate-loaded U.S. trade advisory system has given commercial interests a privileged role in developing U.S. trade agreements since the advisory system’s establishment in 1974,” Wallach writes. “This helps to explain how closed-door trade negotiations have become a favorite venue for corporate interests to achieve policy goals unrelated to trade that could not succeed in the sunshine of public debate.”

The advisory committees meet occasionally in Washington, but their presence is felt most strongly when the United States is engaged in trade negotiations, where members of the committees hover on the sidelines for private briefings at which they supposedly influence what policies the negotiators will pursue and where compromise can be reached. The press is not allowed to attend those briefings.

In her decades at Public Citizen, Wallach unsuccessfully opposed many trade agreements, but she gained new stature when, as she puts it, the Trans-Pacific Partnership got

“so freighted up” with “an ever-expanding set of special-interest giveaways” that Congress began getting cold feet even before then-President Trump withdrew from it.

As director of Rethink Trade, part of the nonprofit American Economic Liberties Project, Wallach is campaigning “to open the process so everyone who will live with the results can have the same access to draft texts of what will become binding policies that will affect their lives—as well as rebalancing representation on the advisory system.”

Wallach’s analysis will please manufacturing workers and labor unions who believe they have been hurt by trade agreements, but U.S. agriculture is so successful as an export business that she will have a hard time winning friends in agriculture except among some smaller farm and ranch groups that, for example, want mandatory country-of-origin labeling for meat to keep cattle prices higher.

Craig Thorn, a former U.S. agricultural-trade negotiator now with the firm of DTB AgriTrade, said in an email that the report fits Wallach’s “protectionist narrative that corporate interests dictate trade policy.” Thorn added, “Ag has influence because of the U.S. political system and because it’s an efficient, export-oriented sector that benefits from trade liberalization and that, as a result, is engaged on trade policy issues.”

Wallach says “the Nixon-era corporate-loaded U.S. trade-advisory system is a significant obstacle to President Biden’s excellent new vision for trade.” The administration seems to be trying to change the system. It has rechartered the Advisory Committee for Trade Policy and Negotiations, which is controlled by USTR and the White House. The new charter emphasizes diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. In March Biden replaced members appointed by Trump and included representatives of unions, environmental groups, academia, and state governments.

Changing committees that involve Cabinet agencies will be harder. But Trade Representative Katherine Tai has met with farmers, ranchers, producers, small businesses, and labor. A spokesman said, “We’re working as fast as possible with Commerce and USDA to add more diverse members to other trade-advisory committees, while also directly engaging the American people ... to craft more resilient, durable trade policy that creates inclusive prosperity.” □



Lori Wallach of Rethink Trade

Contributing Editor Jerry Hagstrom is the founder and executive editor of The Hagstrom Report, which may be found at [www.HagstromReport.com](http://www.HagstromReport.com).