

**Testimony of Mattie Mack, Kentucky Tobacco Grower
Before the
Committee on Ways and Means,
United States House of Representatives
on the Financing Provisions
of the Administration's Health Security Act**

November 18, 1993

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you Mr. Chairman. I am a tobacco farmer from Brandenburg, Kentucky, and I have come here today to share with you my concerns about the proposed tobacco tax to pay for health care reform.

I want to start by telling you what tobacco means to me and my family.

I began farming tobacco back in 1963, when my husband brought me to Kentucky to start our own farm. Over the years, we have built up a 100 acre farm on which we raise cattle, corn, hay and 10,000 pounds of tobacco each year.

Our tobacco crop has been the foundation on which we built our farm and our family. My husband and I raised four children on tobacco. The money from our tobacco crop has paid for their medical care, for their food and for their education.

We have also raised 38 foster children on our farm. The welfare office always sent the "problem children" to us. I discovered that the real problem was that these children did not have anything to do but to get into trouble. So I put them to work on our farm -- they cleaned out the barns, they helped put in the tobacco crop, they hoed the tobacco and they helped top the tobacco. After a long days work, those kids ate a good supper, took a shower and went straight to bed. There was no energy left in them to cause trouble.

My own children and our foster children saved money from tobacco so that they could go to movies or to ball games. I always told those kids: When you spend that money, tell people you earned it from tobacco.

Tobacco is our livelihood.

I am here today because our livelihood is being threatened. I cannot express enough how deeply concerned I am about the President's proposal to increase tobacco taxes to pay for health care reform. Farm families like mine stand to suffer a great deal if this proposal becomes a reality.

I want to tell you that I support the idea of health care reform. When I was young, I studied to be a nurse and worked for a while in the Louisville Children's Hospital. I know first hand that our health care system is in serious need of reform and I congratulate the President for recognizing this fact.

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But the President has proposed a 75 cent per pack cigarette tax as the sole tax to pay for health care reform. This proposal asks farmers, like me, to foot the bill for a system that benefits the entire nation. That is unfair.

It is unfair to tobacco farmers whose hard work already generates \$62,000 per acre in state and federal taxes. It is unfair to black farmers, many of whom grow tobacco, and who historically have lost their farms at a faster rate than white farmers. It is unfair to my home state of Kentucky, which stands to lose over 300 million dollars, and it is unfair to the South as a whole, which stands to lose the very foundation of its economy.

The Bible says that you earn your living by the sweat of your brow and I can tell you that farming tobacco makes you sweat. But farmers are accustomed to hard work. We are also accustomed to dealing with the hardships of nature -- we always have to worry about too much rain on our crop, or not enough. But no amount of hard work or resiliency will prepare us for dealing with the man-made hardships that come from Washington. American tobacco farmers cannot survive this threat to our livelihoods.

I want to invite President and Mrs. Clinton and all of the members of this committee down to Kentucky to see the people who are working so hard to make ends meet -- they are doing it with tobacco. I want them to meet tobacco farmers and their families -- face to face -- and to learn just how much our crop means to us, and to the South. If they understood that, I am certain they would not insist on this unfair tobacco tax.

The simple fact is that tobacco farmers cannot afford to pay for health care reform and we should not have to. All Americans stand to benefit from changes in our health care system and all Americans should pay for it. This is the American way and it is the fair way.

I serve on the credit committee of the Community Farm Alliance which issues small loans to farmers in need. I can tell you two things from that experience. There are a lot of farmers out there in rural America who are already fighting day after day to hold on to their land. There will not be enough money in the coffers of the Community Farm Alliance, or in the coffers of any other farm support groups, to help those farmers survive if this unfair tax becomes a reality.

On behalf of my family and the many tobacco farmers who will never get the opportunity to come here and talk to you, I ask you to work with the President to develop a health care program that is fair to all Americans, including tobacco farmers, tobacco plant workers and southern communities. A tobacco tax increase does not meet this test.

Thank you.