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Schafer to Vilsack: Congress is the 'obstruction'

By Jon H. Harsch

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On his way out the door at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, USDA Sec. Ed Schafer told reporters Friday that he "would love the opportunity to restructure" USDA. He said "We clearly recognize how we can be more efficient, how we can deliver programs better," but that "We get handcuffed in those reorganization efforts by Congress."

Schafer said that with obvious improvements such as merging local USDA offices, "Every time we get in a situation where we want to do something. . . Congress is the obstruction here to good reorganization, good efficiency." In the case of proposals coming from outside USDA to restructure by moving agencies to other federal departments, Schafer said that "It would simply be a bad idea to move the Forest Service over to Interior." Moving USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) would be an equally bad idea. He explained that unlike FDA where the focus is on drug approval beforehand, USDA's focus is on constant monitoring of food processing by on-site USDA inspectors. Instead of moving FSIS to FDA, he said, "I think if you're going to move something, it would be important to move all food from FDA to USDA."

To restructure USDA, Schafer said, "The problem is not USDA, the problem is on the Hill and I have no doubt that the people of USDA could deliver more efficient, a better and less costly system if we're allowed to do so."

Trade is a second area where Schafer has clashed with Congress over priorities. Schafer said that he expects a continued emphasis on expanding trade from former Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack who will be Schafer's successor if confirmed by the Senate. Schafer said "I believe that as a governor from an agricultural state, that he understands the importance of trade for the strength of the agricultural economy. And there is no question about that. Agriculture is the only sector of our economy that has a positive balance of trade. We are not only feeding the world with our technology, with our ability, with our seeds and with our equipment, but we also are providing the base of relationships between countries that is developed through the trade of agricultural products, so the trading relation goes country to country, president to president, secretary to secretary beyond just the food, foodstuffs and equipment that are shipped across borders. I think Gov. Vilsack is very

well aware of the strength of agriculture in the trade arena . . . I am assuming that because of his strong agriculture background in an agricultural state that he understands the necessity to drive our economy forward through trade.”

For additional comments from Sec. Schafer, see:

<http://www.agri-pulse.com/uploaded/20090108H1.pdf>

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