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Tom Vilsack wows Senators in his confirmation hearing

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Just as the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) involves virtually every aspect of government and every citizen, the Senate confirmation hearing Wednesday for President-elect Obama's choice for the next Secretary of Agriculture touched on issues ranging from nutrition, healthcare, organic farming and national energy policy, to civil rights, conservation, crop insurance and eligibility for federal farm program payments. Secretary-designee Tom Vilsack, a former Governor of Iowa, showed himself thoroughly equipped to handle this broad sweep of issues that Senators questioned him about.

Suitably deferential, Vilsack did what all prospective Cabinet members are advised to do in their Senate confirmation hearings: he praised members of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry for their wealth of knowledge and said he would need more time to become fully familiar with issues such as whether to raise the ethanol blend wall from the current 10% to perhaps 15% or more. But along with showing deference, Vilsack demonstrated a thorough familiarity with every question. The only hint of concern came from several southern senators who asked for – and got – assurances that Vilsack, from a corn, soybean, livestock, and ethanol state, will give equal priority within USDA to crops such as rice, peanuts and cotton.

As expected, Vilsack's nomination was warmly welcomed by both Republican and Democratic senators. His deft handling of the hearing virtually guarantees that he will be confirmed by the full Senate on January 20th and will be ready to participate in President Obama's first Cabinet meeting, expected to convene early next week. A transition spokesperson pointed out that agriculture and the full range of rural issues, including not just farm programs but everything from rural unemployment, housing, and healthcare to broadband, will almost certainly be represented better in this new Cabinet than ever before. That's because Vilsack as USDA Secretary will be joined at the table by two other Cabinet members thoroughly versed in all the details of farm and rural issues: former Senators Tom Daschle and Ken Salazar, joining the Cabinet respectively as Secretary of Health & Human Services and Secretary of the Interior.

Echoing other senators' concerns, Sen. Blanche Lincoln (D-AR) pointed out that among the other difficulties facing farmers, "the rules of the 2008 Farm Bill have not yet been finalized." Along with Ranking Member Saxby Chambliss (R-GA), Lincoln charged that some of the provisions implemented by the outgoing administration do not reflect

congressional intent. She explained that that the '08 Farm Bill was “a very delicate compromise” and called on Vilsack to “work with us on that and understand . . . what we did in that compromise and hopefully work with us to see that it is implemented in a fair and a just way.”

Along with assuring senators that he will work with Congress on implementing the Farm Bill as intended, Vilsack responded to Lincoln’s concerns with one of his most extensive answers:

“My job, as you have so well stated, is to represent virtually every aspect of agriculture, in all parts of the country, and so let me say, I think there are a lot of parallels and a lot of similarities. Regardless of where you farm or ranch, it is always a difficult struggle because so much of what you do, you have no control over. . . You don’t have control of your input costs, you don’t have control over the weather, you don’t have control over invasive species coming in without any fault of yours. . . I think it is also true that whether you’re a cotton farmer in Georgia or you are a rice farmer in Arkansas, you ought to have multiple opportunities that the USDA supports so that you can make a living for your family. So that means aggressively promoting the Conservation Stewardship Program. . . It means aggressively promoting export opportunities and using all of the tools in our Foreign Agricultural Service to promote American products. . . It means using research and development in creating and finding alternative uses from products we currently grow, opening additional markets, and figuring out ways we can produce it for less, more efficiently.”

Repeatedly, Vilsack stressed the role he believes USDA should play in seeking to create additional sources of income for rural communities, whether through traditional agricultural products, or in other areas such as selling carbon offsets or developing wind farms and other renewable energy systems. He noted as well that USDA’s food assistance programs have a stimulative effect, generating \$7 in economic activity for every \$1 spent.

Explaining that he began his career as “a small town lawyer,” he said he launched his law practice “doing income tax returns for farmers. I can tell you, this time of year brings back memories of folks bringing in grocery sacks full of paper receipts and calendars with numbers written on them and dropping them on the desk and saying here’s my income tax information, I hope you won’t charge me more than \$25. . . From that, I learned how difficult farming is . . . That led me to the conclusion that it was necessary in policy to try to promote as many income opportunities as possible for farm families, to give them a diverse menu of options.”

Senate Agriculture Committee Chair Tom Harkin (D-IA) closed the hearing by thanking Vilsack for his responses and concluded that he is confident his fellow Iowan will be confirmed as Secretary of Agriculture next Tuesday and that “I look forward to working with you.”