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## **USDA Sec. Vilsack outlines priorities in his 1<sup>st</sup> press conference**

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In his first press conference as U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, former Iowa Governor Tom Vilsack told reporters Wednesday, shortly after being sworn into office and his first Cabinet meeting, that he's already started work on three of his priorities:

- Ethics,
- Civil rights, and,
- Reviewing all pending rules and regulations from the outgoing Bush administration, as requested by President Obama's Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel.

Vilsack explained that his first press conference was being held directly following a meeting with his staff on ethics – and that he planned a USDA meeting first thing Thursday morning on civil rights. He said he is committed to addressing civil rights issues at USDA “in an aggressive way” both to deal with “outstanding civil rights claims” and to ensure that going forward USDA “does not discriminate in any way or any form.”

Vilsack also stressed that “the most important thing for us to do right now is to have a complete and thorough understanding of the Farm Bill as it was drafted by Congress and to make sure that we implement the provisions of the Farm Bill as promptly and properly as possible.” Noting congressional concerns about implementation, he said there are “600 provisions and 15 titles that have to be implemented and that is our job and that's going to be our focus.”

On the question of pending rules and regulations, such as USDA's recently issued final rule on COOL (Country of Origin Labeling), Vilsack said the Obama administration directive is “putting essentially a stop on all rules and regulations that are in the pipeline, to give us a chance to review them.” The Jan. 20<sup>th</sup> memo from Emanuel on “Regulatory Review” provides for “extending for 60 days the effective date of regulations that have been published in the Federal Register but not yet taken effect. . . for the purpose of reviewing questions of law and policy.” In cases where pending implementation is postponed for 60 days for review, the memo provide for reopening “the notice-and-comment period for 30 days to allow interested parties to provide comments. . .”

Vilsack declined to comment on personnel changes at USDA. But in a sign of change, the USDA directory board has already been updated by removing most names and adding these three:

- Chief of Staff, John R. Norris
- Deputy Chief of Staff, Carole E. Jett
- Special Assistant to Secretary, David J. Lazarus

And in a sign of interest, USDA staff were visiting the front lobby to check on the latest names added to the directory board.



**USDA Sec. Vilsack holds his first press conference. Photo: Agri-Pulse**

As Vilsack was holding his press conference, Republicans in a House Appropriations Committee markup meeting complained that Democrats were rushing their \$825 billion recovery legislation through too quickly and instead should slow down to allow for full subcommittee and committee hearings. Asked about this challenge to quick passage of the recovery bill, Vilsack said that “I think the President and Vice President and the President’s economic team have been correct that we need to stimulate the economy, that we need to be focused on job growth. And I think they are also correct that investments in infrastructure and renewable energy and in renewable fuels, second and third generation biofuels for example, are ways in which you can create jobs and opportunity in rural communities.” He said he believes there is widespread hope that “Congress acts quickly and expeditiously on the stimulus package.”

Questioned about nutrition programs, Vilsack said he and President Obama are committed to being “creative and innovative” in this year’s reauthorization of the nutrition programs to provide more nutritious food. He said he is working with Secretary of Health and Human Services-designee Tom Daschle because improving food programs improves health, reducing health care costs. He also noted that the food stamps and WIC programs provide economic stimulus, pointing out that for nutrition programs, “every dollar invested generates \$4 of activity in the economy.”

Vilsack also noted that he has already had discussions with EPA Administrator-designee Lisa Jackson “on the need for us to have an open line of communication.” He predicted that he and Jackson will work together well because “she understands the linkage between agriculture and EPA.”