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## Vilsack praises USDA, outlines challenges & opportunities

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On his second full day as U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, former Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack told a standing-room-only gathering of USDA employees Thursday that “First and foremost, I wanted to say thank you for the work that you do.”

Speaking in the central patio of the USDA administration building, Vilsack quoted from a note given to him by his predecessor, Secretary Ed Schafer: “USDA is a great department and you are inheriting a caring, committed and capable workforce who will respond to your leadership and direction.” Vilsack called Schafer’s remarks “well deserved praise” and added that “I know that you all are dedicated and concerned about this country and those who work the land, and I share that concern.” He said that USDA’s employees, whether working on conservation, renewable energy, the Forest Service, international trade or a host of other areas, are “returning a sense of hope and opportunity to rural communities” and are engaged in “noble work.” He promised to explain this work to the American public as a whole, to create greater understanding and appreciation for USDA.

Vilsack also delivered a warning that “These will not be easy times. . . There will be painful decisions at times.” But he said that the new administration’s economic stimulus legislation will help provide “the opportunity to create a new 21<sup>st</sup> century economy in America, an economy that really speaks to the strengths and values of those who work in rural America. . . An opportunity for us to help this country become energy secure, with renewable energy.” Recalling the work he did on renewable energy as Governor of Iowa, Vilsack pointed out that “The income and state revenues in the state of Iowa are significantly better off than other states today, in part because we embraced renewable energy and biofuels.”

In other remarks, peppered with self-deprecating humor, Vilsack commented on issues ranging from trade and organic agriculture, to biofuels and dealing with Congress:

“Ethics, open government and transparency. I feel very strongly. . . that it is important for us to make a connection to the people we serve, so that they have trust and faith in us. That requires us to be trusting of them. Providing information. When we make a mistake,

acknowledging it and moving on. Far too often, what we have done is we've attempted to try to mask a mistake or try to explain it away or try to provide excuses, and that just creates uncertainty, so the President has suggested strongly in his executive orders that we be a more transparent government and that we be a government, frankly, that is about regular folk, not necessarily about the special interests. . .”



**USDA Sec. Vilsack addresses USDA employees in USDA patio. Photo: Agri-Pulse**

“We can’t as a country continue to pay 16 to 17% of our gross domestic product in health care costs when our competitors are spending a lot less. That’s why it’s going to be a very important for USDA to really promote a nutritional diet, to really encourage, incent, and figure out ways in which, particularly children, have access to good quality foods, and to do it in a way that is affordable to families. That is going to be a challenge, but I think you’ll see a very significant push there. . .”

“Trade is extremely important, as I said during the confirmation hearings, trade is very important to agriculture and agriculture is very important to trade. Having spent time in Seattle during the WTO meetings in 1999, I understand and appreciate how difficult it is because every country grows something and their culture is directly connected to what they grow. And I also know that there is not necessarily a divergence but a division of interest when it comes to agriculture. Having said that, I think it is important for USDA to be actively monitoring and engaged in trade discussions and to make sure that agricultural interests are not compromised as a result of any trade agreement that could potentially be reached. So as we put our team together, that’s one of the directions and instructions that I’m going to make, that we want to be at the table to make sure that the interests of farmers and ranchers and the communities that support them are protected and are fully understood before an agreement is reached. . .”

“I want to be a champion of diversity in agriculture, because having represented farmers during the ‘80s, what I realized was that when you limit their production opportunities, their income opportunities, you limit their capacity to survive in tough economic times. And so it is important, I think, in America that we do all we can to make sure that organic farmers can succeed. It is one of the fastest growing segments of our ag economy if you will. At the same time. . . we have a challenge, and that challenge is to make sure that there is enough food and feed to make sure that people in our country and all over the

world are adequately fed. Someone's got to do that job as well. So it is a question of not either or, in my view, it is a question of how do we create the capacity for both to exist and to recognize that both are important, not one or the other. . .”

“There is obviously a commitment on the part of this administration and certainly the USDA, to recognizing the mandates and the requirements for biofuels, so clearly the challenge is to make sure we accelerate the research on second and third generation feedstocks and that we do a better job of figuring out ways in which processing of whatever feedstock we have can be done more efficiently. And the reason why that is important is, that in these difficult times in the business cycle, the more efficient you are, the greater the chances are that you will survive these difficult times. And so if government can help by developing information on the best practices, figuring out different ways to use less energy, less water, get more fuel out of a bushel of corn or some other feedstock, we ought to be about that business. And so that is one thing that we are going to try to focus on. . .”

“I have a lot to learn about dealing with Congress. There are a lot of great people up there who know a lot more about this city and the ways of this city than I do and I think I have got to go through a learning process and I have to earn the trust of folks. So that's one of the things that I'm going to try to do, is to build relationships. I got the sense in talking to Senators and members of the House that the Secretary could do a better job of making sure that there is constant communication, even when there's disagreement, and that we do as best we can following the intent of Congress when laws are passed, and if the intent is unclear, or we are uncertain about what the intent is, then we need to reach out and try to work with folks to make sure that we do as best we can and if the intent is not clear, to encourage Congress to provide a clearer message to us as to precisely what their expectations are.”

To watch a video of Secretary Vilsack's Jan. 22<sup>nd</sup> address to USDA employees, click: <mms://ocbmtcwmp.usda.gov/content/secy/secy012209a.wmv>

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