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Soybean growers say Sec. Vilsack shares their priorities

By Jon H. Harsch

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After meeting with Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack at USDA Wednesday, American Soybean Association (ASA) Chairman John Hoffman came away pleased by Sec. Vilsack's strong commitments to promoting U.S. agricultural exports and to promoting biodiesel and other renewable biofuels. He said that for its part, ASA is committed to providing analysis and working hard to convince Congress to renew needed Trade Promotion Authority, to provide additional funding for USDA's cash-starved Foreign Agricultural Service, and to move quickly on new energy legislation.

Hoffman said that as an Iowa farmer himself, "I've had the experience of having Tom Vilsack for my governor for eight years, so I think he will be an excellent spokesman for farmers, for agriculture, for the USDA." He predicted that "all facets of agriculture will benefit from this administration – biofuels, rural development, conservation, sustaining our safety net, these are all issues that are important to soybean farmers across the country and I think they are top-level priority issues for Secretary Vilsack also."

Hoffman's one complaint is that many important issues are on hold because "the people that we deal with directly, the under-secretaries, the administrators are not in place." But he said Vilsack is determined to get his new team moved through background checks and security clearances as quickly as possible.

ASA First Vice President Rob Joslin noted that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) will decide how to calculate international indirect land use for the Renewable Fuels Standard, which will directly affect biodiesel development. So he said it's a very good sign that Secretary Vilsack confirmed he is actively discussing this and other key issues with EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson.

Hoffman and Joslin were also pleased by Vilsack's assurance that he is in close touch with USDA's Inspector General regarding the IG's current investigation of alleged problems with the United Soybean Board's handling of farmer checkoff funds. Hoffman said "Farmers in this country need to have confidence in a strong, reliable checkoff." He explained that he is confident Vilsack will ensure there is proper oversight in future and that Vilsack will implement whatever corrective actions are needed.