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Farm groups & USDA discuss proposed Obama budget cuts

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For over an hour Wednesday, the nation's leading farm organizations met with key USDA staff to be briefed on President Obama's budget proposals which include cutting off direct farm program payments to farmers with over \$500,000 in annual sales.

USDA had invited the farm groups to the meeting which was to include Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, as the first step in a process expected to last into April. Vilsack was unable to attend because he took part Wednesday morning in a White House press conference focused on steps government departments are taking to cut federal spending. At the White House, Vilsack told reporters that USDA has already identified over \$18 million in savings through changes such as cutting down on USDA travel by using teleconferences.

The meeting at USDA headquarters enabled Vilsack's Chief of Staff John Norris, Deputy Chief of Staff Carole Jett and several assistants to meet with representatives of farm organizations including the American Corn Growers Association, American Farm Bureau Federation, American Soybean Association, National Association of Wheat Growers, National Corn Growers Association, National Cotton Council, National Farmers Union, National Sorghum Producers, U.S. Rice Producers Association, and USA Rice.

Mary Kay Thatcher of the American Farm Bureau Federation commented on the meeting that "It was very nice to be asked over and have a chance to ask questions. We understand their hands are tied and they can't answer all the questions. But it was nice to be asked and we will continue to give them feedback. . . It was nice outreach. They probably didn't hear much they hadn't already heard." She said that there has been criticism of basing the proposed cut-off for farm program direct payments on \$500,000 in sales rather than \$500,000 in adjusted gross income. But she said "I think that's something that they can't answer yet."

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