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Senate Ag Committee promises swift USDA confirmations

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Impatient to accelerate full implementation of 2008 Farm Bill provisions, Senate Agriculture Committee Chair Tom Harkin (D-IA) promised accelerated action on confirming three key USDA nominations: Kathleen Merrigan for Deputy Secretary of Agriculture, Jim Miller for Under Secretary for Farm and Foreign Agriculture Services, and Joe Leonard, Jr. for Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights.

As he closed Wednesday afternoon's confirmation hearing for the three nominees, Harkin gave senators just three hours to submit any additional questions – and gave USDA just one day to provide responses. The goal is full Senate confirmation of Merrigan, Miller and Leonard before Congress heads home for Easter.



Kathleen Merrigan, Joe Leonard, Jr. & Jim Miller at their Senate confirmation hearing. Photo: Alice Welch, USDA

Committee questioning and comments focused on two main issues: improving USDA's performance on civil rights and Farm Bill implementation. Harkin pointed out that civil rights problems at the department have been an ongoing concern for more than 15 years and that "USDA has a vast backlog of race discrimination claims from employees and customers." He noted that "African-American farmers continue to file and seek to settle cases involving the Pigford litigation" and that "Native American, Hispanic and female farmers are all currently suing the Department for program discrimination." Harkin and

Ranking Member Saxby Chambliss (D-GA) welcomed Leonard's commitment to tackle civil rights problems and Harkin noted that Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack is firmly committed to dealing with past complaints and eliminating discrimination going forward.

Both Merrigan and Miller made it clear that they are committed to implementing Farm Bill provisions as quickly as possible, including finalizing rules for new emergency disaster provisions and the Biomass Crop Assistance Program (BCAP).

Senator Chambliss called on Merrigan, a long-time advocate of organic agriculture, to assure the committee that she will serve all parts of U.S. agriculture. For an audio report on the exchange and Merrigan's assurances which satisfied the senator's concerns, click on Stewart Doan's News Network update for Wednesday.

In her testimony, Merrigan noted that after her own six years on the Senate Agriculture Committee staff helping draft farm legislation, "I came to understand first-hand how essential it is for members of the committee to receive timely, robust, and honest assessments from the Administration on issues before the committee. For this reason, I want to begin my testimony pledging that, if confirmed, I will always prioritize answering the committee's questions and calls for assistance."

Merrigan, who served previously at USDA as Administrator of the Agricultural Marketing Service, also emphasized her own commitment to Farm Bill implementation. She explained that "I understand that farmers and ranchers need certainty. In some areas of the country, farmers have already begun or are about to begin planting and they need to fully understand the programs that they will be utilizing. If confirmed, I understand that it will be my job to assist the Secretary and other leaders in the department to ensure that this law is implemented as Congress intended and as quickly as possible."

Miller promised to deal with "The cost/price squeeze faced by producers in each agriculture sector and each region of the country" and to ensure that in the important areas of civil rights, "Discrimination in any form will not be tolerated." Reflecting the wide reach of his responsibilities if confirmed as Under Secretary for Farm and Foreign Agriculture Services, Miller said he is determined to:

- Conclude the Departmental review of the 2008 Farm Bill regulations promulgated by the previous administration and press to issue the regulations pertaining to the 2009 commodity programs as well as other important provisions such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and the Biomass Crop Assistance Program (BCAP) as soon as is practical.
- Ascertain the status and expedite the process of developing the regulations pertaining to the implementation of the disaster provisions of the 2008 Farm Bill as amended by subsequent legislation.
- Examine the tools available to the Department to help alleviate the crisis conditions that exist within specific sectors of production agriculture such as dairy.
- Review the public comments and initiate the process to promulgate the rules pertaining to the payment limitation provisions for the 2010 commodity program year.
- Work to ensure the agriculture export programs supported by the Foreign Agriculture Service continue to meet the needs of the cooperator groups and

stakeholders in their efforts to expand U.S. agriculture sales abroad and help alleviate hunger overseas.

- Implement the modifications to the federal crop insurance program as prescribed by the 2008 Farm Bill.
- Initiate preparations for the upcoming round of negotiations of the Standard Reinsurance Agreement between USDA and its private sector insurance partners.
- Work within the Department and with Congress to develop a realistic and workable plan to modernize the information technology at USDA necessary to ensure the efficient delivery of its programs.

To read the full Merrigan, Miller and Leonard statements, or watch a video of the confirmation hearing, click on: <http://agriculture.senate.gov/>

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