



04-29-09

Sec. Vilsack fights to reverse H1N1 flu damage to pork market

By Jon H. Harsch

© Copyright Agri-Pulse Communications, Inc.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack told reporters Wednesday that he was “tempted to refuse to answer any questions” referring to “swine flu.” He pointed out “This not a food-borne illness, this is not necessarily related to swine and so we are very insistent on referring to this as the ‘H1N1 virus’ because consistent repeating of ‘swine’ basically makes a difference and is affecting and impacting markets negatively.”

Vilsack said mistaken references to swine have not only impacted the pork market but have had an impact on grain prices.

To reverse the negative impacts, Vilsack said USDA immediately ordered its Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) offices around the world to contact trading partners “to reassure them that this was not a food-borne illness issue, that this was not an issue about the safety of pork or pork products coming from America.” He said “We received reassurance and a very strong statement from some of our trading partners, Japan in particular, recognizing that.”

In response to other countries banning pork imports from the U.S., Vilsack said USDA and the U.S. Trade Representative “will continue to have conversations with those who have taken action. We think actions of this kind must be science based, there must be some rationale based in science for the kinds of bans that have been suggested. We don’t think that exists today.” He said “We are going to continue to remind folks of the disruptive nature of these bans and we hope that they will respond and react. And if not, we’ll take a look at what other actions we could take.”

Vilsack said he’s committed to “making sure that people don’t reinforce a negative message by how they characterize this virus, that we continue to reinforce the notion that consumption of pork and pork products is safe, that American pork and pork products are safe for export, and ought to be welcomed in every country. . . This is not about pork products, it is not about pork, it is not about the safety of pork products, it is not about the safety of pork, it is not about whether you can eat pork or not. You can. It’s safe and we want to make sure that we reinforce that message.”

On the North American front, Vilsack said “we are making a concerted effort to reach out to all 50 states, to state veterinarians, to state agriculture departments, to make sure that there is constant surveillance so that we can detect or determine any problem with our own swine herd. And we are working with our Canadian and Mexican partners to make sure that there is a full exchange of information. We are also basically sending staff to Mexico, as is the case with a number of other agencies of the federal government, in order to make sure that we get reliable and accurate information as quickly as possible.”

#30