



05-07-09

Senators urge USDA nominees to fight for ag & rural priorities

By Jon H. Harsch

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In a confirmation hearing Thursday for four key USDA nominees, Senate Agriculture Committee Ranking Member Saxby Chambliss (R-GA) said USDA's agricultural research system is both vitally important – and seriously underfunded. He warned that “Within the administration, USDA struggles for budgetary support and in Congress, the system is pitted against other funding priorities.” Calling for a champion for agricultural research, Chambliss told Dr. Rajiv J. Shah, nominated to be Under Secretary of Research, Education and Economics and USDA's Chief Scientist, “I hope you're ready to be that champion.”

In their statements to the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry and in responding to questions, Dr. Shah and his three fellow nominees all acknowledged that USDA is dealing with major challenges and all committed to championing the administration's goals including a science-based approach, transparency, accountability, energy independence, human health and nutrition, economic recovery, and civil rights.

Committee Chair Tom Harkin (D-IA) called on Dallas P. Tonsager, nominated to be Undersecretary of Agriculture for Rural Development, to support “new and expanding businesses, boosting renewable energy development, upgrading outdated and deficient rural water and wastewater systems, expanding broadband telecommunications, and attracting new public and private investments in rural America.” In response, Tonsager who has served as a Farm Credit Administration board member since 2004, promised to take an aggressive approach to dealing with “lost jobs, disappearing essential services, outmigration, and crumbling infrastructure” in rural America.

Echoing commitments from the three other nominees, Tonsager specifically promised “to resolve any outstanding civil rights claims whether in program or employment practices” at USDA. He also pledged “to renew the hopes of rural Americans everywhere so that America, specifically rural America, will once again prosper.”

Former congressional staffer and current CEO of the National Association of Conservation Districts Krysta Harden, nominated to be Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Congressional Relations, listed current challenges: “implementation of the 2008 Farm

Bill, getting economic recovery dollars on the ground, addressing lasting implications of recent disasters, defining agriculture's role in climate change, reauthorizing the Child Nutrition Act, the list goes on and on." As the person nominated to be USDA's primary contact with Congress, she told the senators that she looks forward to "working with each of you to make sure our policies are forward thinking and keep American agriculture competitive."

Nominated to be Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Administration, veteran USDA official Pearlie S. Reed said that as a former Chief of USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service and former Acting Assistant Secretary for Administration, "I have seen all sides of USDA, the excellent, the good, the bad, and the ugly." He said the complexity of USDA "is compounded by the massive structure of the USDA field-based agencies, and the system of state and county committees, commissions, and boards." He pledged to provide the management services needed "to underpin the effective and efficient delivery of USDA programs and services."

Dr. Shah, a medical doctor and currently Director of Agricultural Development for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, said Congress provided new opportunities to increase the visibility and impact of USDA agricultural research by authorizing the new National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) in last year's Farm Bill. He said NIFA is "a unique opportunity to create a strategic, focused and result-oriented research enterprise that can help bring improved agricultural research to bear in serving our nation's food, health and energy needs."

The closest the hearing came to contentious issues was when Senator Chambliss asked Dallas Tonsager to commit to having USDA provide Rural Utilities Service financing for "non carbon emitting" nuclear power plants. Tonsager replied simply that "I understand that there are prohibitions in place regarding the use of financing for nuclear power or coal base power."

Senator Richard Lugar (R-IN) asked both Tonsager and Shah to find some way to correct what he called EPA's "ludicrous" indirect-land-use ruling this week linking U.S. biofuels production with deforestation in other countries. Tonsager responded that he will do what he can to "make sure we go with an economically sustainable alternative energy system including corn-based ethanol, cellulosic ethanol, biofuels, as broadly and as logically and as sensibly as we can. . . I can assure you our agency will be heavily involved in supporting the biofuels industry." Shah added that "Meeting the renewable fuel targets broadly of course will require increased contributions from agriculture."

A Senate floor confirmation vote on the four USDA nominees is expected next week, with the expectation that all four will be confirmed and able to start work next week.