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Ag Secretary Vilsack defends climate bill in House hearing

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For the first three hours of a seven-hour House Agriculture Committee hearing on the Waxman/Markey climate change bill June 11th, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack patiently reassured skeptical committee members that farmers and ranchers will gain from an improved version of the current bill.

Sounding refreshed by the grilling, on his way to another appointment Vilsack explained that he recognizes the committee's concerns and that "what I had to do was to make sure that the opportunity side of this discussion wasn't forgotten." What he also did, diplomatically, was remind members that Congress has a responsibility to use its committee, amendment and debate process to improve legislation and that "there is obviously work yet to be done on this bill." During the hearing, he told the committee "I believe at the end of the day, that agriculture's and forestry's role in cap-and-trade will be recognized. . . I honestly believe that if this is established and set up properly, that we can in the countryside benefit from a wide variety of options and opportunities created from a cap-and-trade system."

Repeatedly during the hearing, Republican members urged Vilsack to support postponing legislation until potential impacts on agriculture are fully understood. Echoing points he made during the hearing, Vilsack said "The reality is that at some point in time the world has to respond to the climate change challenge. And the longer we wait to respond to it, the more difficult the solutions are going to be. I believe that now is the time for us to respond."

Both Democratic and Republican committee members repeatedly called on Vilsack to ensure that any climate change bill give USDA authority to deal with farmers and ranchers in administering a carbon offsets program – not EPA. Committee Chair Collin Peterson (D-MN) said "a lot of us on the committee do not want the EPA near our farmers." Former committee Chair Bob Goodlatte (R-VA) said that "EPA is not farmer-friendly or even farmer neutral." In response, Vilsack said that rather than seeing EPA as an adversary, he believes in a partnership approach which recognizes that "each agency of the federal government has expertise, knowledge, technical assistance that are their strengths." He said EPA, USDA and other agencies are working well together and said he hopes the final bill will utilize USDA's special strengths such as its "capacity to reach out into the countryside," its relationships with farmers and ranchers, and its technical expertise, data and information.

Vilsack said that once the bill is finalized, “I’m prepared at USDA to work with Congress and our federal agency partners to make it happen and make it work.” Both in the hearing and in his comments afterwards, he stressed that filling in the details to create a workable bill “is ultimately Congress’ decision.”

Republicans appeared unmoved by Vilsack’s assurances. The committee’s Ranking Member Frank Lucas (R-OK) summed up the views expressed by his party colleagues when he said “There are still many unanswered questions surrounding the Waxman/Markey bill. And yet, we have Speaker Pelosi and Chairman Waxman trying to force it through Congress. . . The cap-and-trade part of the bill creates a national energy tax that will do more harm to production agriculture, American industry, and our standard of living than it will do any good for the environment. From higher energy costs to lost jobs to higher food prices, cap-and-trade promises to cap our incomes, our livelihoods, and our standard of living while it trades away American jobs and opportunities. . . Proponents of cap-and-trade, such as Secretary Vilsack, like to claim that agriculture will be a ‘net winner’ when it comes to climate change legislation, but they have failed to provide any numbers to make the case.”

Repeatedly asked about the risk that passing cap-and-trade in the U.S. will give a competitive advantage to China, India and other countries without similar environmental programs, Vilsack said it is important for the U.S. to show leadership rather than “give them an excuse” to ignore taking action on climate change. He predicted that by leading the way, not only will other countries follow but the U.S. will use its innovative skills to develop new products and new technologies, creating new green jobs and new export opportunities.

After Vilsack left the hearing, the committee heard from eight witnesses including American Farm Bureau Federation President Bob Stallman and National Farmers Union President Roger Johnson. After four hours of exchanges during which Republican members downplayed the risks of climate change and predicted “we are going to lose jobs,” Rep. Jerry Moran (R-KS) summed up Republican sentiment: “. . . common sense demands that we defeat this bill on the House floor.”

Rep. Tim Walz (D-MN) summed up feeling among Democrats: “Climate change is real and it’s a serious problem. . . There is only one national or international scientific agency that will not agree with that and that’s the American Association of Petroleum Geologists. . . We have an obligation to our children to address this problem, to set an example to the world, to strengthen our economic security and gain energy independence. However, it must be done wisely, it must make sense, and it must do no harm.”

Committee Chair Peterson commented that the hearing “helped us better understand what is being proposed and what can be done to improve the legislation.” As for what happens next, that may depend largely on what Peterson learned when he slipped out of the hearing for an extensive meeting with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) and House Energy & Commerce Committee Chair Henry Waxman (D-CA).

To read Secretary Vilsack’s statement and other written testimony from the House Agriculture Committee’s June 11th hearing on the climate change bill, go to: <http://agriculture.house.gov/hearings/statements.html>