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Agriculture Sec. Vilsack leads Obama administration Rural Tour

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Kicking off with a joint appearance with Vice President Joe Biden and Commerce Secretary Gary Locke in Pennsylvania today, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack will be joined by other members of the Obama Cabinet for a series of public meetings in rural communities across the country in July, August and September. President Obama announced that his administration's "Rural Tour" is intended to show "how the USDA and other federal agencies are working to strengthen rural America."

The kick-off meeting in Erie, Pennsylvania today will focus on rural broadband. Speaking of the overall initiative, Secretary Vilsack explains that "Strengthening rural communities is one of USDA's top priorities, and the Rural Tour will enable us to learn from people throughout America about how USDA and the Obama administration are having an impact on the lives of rural Americans. I look forward to hearing the thoughts, concerns and stories about each community's vision for its future and collecting ideas about how USDA can better serve these communities."

Sec. Vilsack, the only Cabinet secretary who will attend every Rural Tour event, says the tour provides an opportunity to discuss USDA's efforts to expand economic opportunities in rural communities; update critical infrastructure like health clinics, schools, police stations and wastewater systems; and improve the quality of life for the Americans who live, work and raise a family in rural communities. Discussion topics for the events scheduled in Alaska, Louisiana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Wisconsin include rural health issues, economic development, infrastructure, education, energy, natural resources, and agriculture.

One issue expected to be high on the agenda throughout the tour is proposed climate change legislation. The House passed its version of a comprehensive climate and energy bill on June 26 in a closely fought 219-212 vote. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) has said the Senate will begin work on its own climate-change bill following the August congressional recess. As shown by the House vote, in which 44 mainly rural-district Democrats voted against the climate bill, attitudes in rural America toward climate legislation are expected to play a significant role in both drafting and deciding the fate of climate legislation in the Senate this fall.

The July 1st kick-off event featuring Biden, Vilsack and Locke will also include Federal Communications Commission Chair Julius Genachowski and Congresswoman Kathy

Dahlkemper (D-PA), a member of the House Agriculture Committee. This first event is at noon, July 1st, at Seneca High School, 10770 Wattsburg Rd., Erie, Pennsylvania.

Planned “Rural Tour” events include:

July 1st - Vice President Joe Biden and Secretaries Tom Vilsack and Gary Locke will travel to **Erie, PA**, to discuss rural broadband.

July 16th - Secretaries Tom Vilsack, Gary Locke and Ray LaHood will travel to **La Crosse, WI**, to discuss rural economic development.

July 18th - Secretaries Tom Vilsack and Steven Chu will travel to **Ringgold, VA**, to discuss green jobs and a new energy economy, with a focus on weatherization and carbon sequestration.

July 20th - Secretaries Tom Vilsack, Eric Shinseki, Hilda Solis and Kathleen Sebelius will travel to **St. John’s Parish, LA**, to discuss rural health.

August 12th - Secretaries Tom Vilsack Steven Chu, Shaun Donovan, Arne Duncan, and Ken Salazar will travel to **Bethel, AK**, to discuss rural infrastructure, green jobs and a new energy economy, as well as climate change.

August 16th - Secretaries Tom Vilsack and Ken Salazar will travel to **Zanesville, OH**, to discuss green jobs and a new energy economy, with a focus on renewable energies.

August 17th - Secretaries Tom Vilsack and Arne Duncan will travel to **Hamlet, NC**, to discuss rural education.

September 28th - Secretaries Tom Vilsack and Ken Salazar will travel to **Scottsbluff, NE**, to discuss production agriculture.

September 30th - Secretaries Tom Vilsack and Shaun Donovan will travel to **Las Cruces, NM**, to discuss rural infrastructure.

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