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Vilsack & United Fresh agree: better nutrition cuts health costs

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The morning after President Obama's healthcare address to Congress, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack delivered a three-part promise Thursday to some 400 produce industry growers, shippers, distributors, exporters, importers, retailers and foodservice operators:

- Healthcare reform will be signed into law this year.
- As part of healthcare reform, shifting Americans to better eating habits will expand market opportunities for the produce industry.
- The shift to eating more fruits and vegetables will dramatically cut America's healthcare costs.

This win-win-win message was welcomed by members of the United Fresh Produce Association gathered in Washington, DC for their annual "United Fresh Washington Public Policy Conference." They also welcomed Vilsack's assurance that the administration is moving aggressively to implement a comprehensive federal food safety system "that focuses on prevention." Another sign of shared objectives is that both Vilsack and United Fresh are working hard to switch school meals from French fries to fruits and vegetables – Vilsack with Sesame Street PSAs and United Fresh with its "Salad Bar in Every School" campaign. To support its campaign, United Fresh invited Congress to an overflow-crowd salad bar reception – and then donated the \$7,500 salad bar equipment to a local Washington, DC school.

Vilsack said the administration's determination to improve the nation's diet follows naturally from what then President-Elect Obama told Vilsack when the two first met last December to discuss naming Vilsack as the new Secretary of Agriculture: "I want you to make sure that America's children consume more fruits and vegetables." Vilsack explained that Obama had "a far expanded vision for USDA and he was most interested in nutrition, he was most interested in improving the nutritional value of foods that Americans consume every day."

Vilsack said USDA has implemented President Obama's directives first by improving the food provided in the WIC program "to help pregnant women and young children have an introduction to fruits and vegetables and more nutritious eating." As the next step,

Vilsack said USDA is focused on improving USDA-subsidized school meals which he said “for far too many of our children,” may provide “the only complete meal that they have during the day.”

Vilsack called on United Fresh to support USDA’s efforts to improve America’s eating habits by publicizing the importance of better nutrition and by helping USDA identify and eliminate “food deserts” – the areas in inner cities and rural areas where there are no grocery stores, no nearby access to fruits and vegetables.

Also at United Fresh’s two-day conference, Congressman Sam Farr (D-CA) who represents the Salinas Valley “salad bowl,” said he’s about to introduce new legislation to “change our school feeding programs.” He said his bill will address the major problem of having six separate school nutrition programs, separately administered in ways that both make it difficult for many children to sign up for free meals and waste “tons of money” on unnecessary administrative costs.

With Vilsack’s and Farr’s words as encouragement, United Fresh members then fanned out across Capitol Hill to meet with senators and congressmen with the message that Congress needs to tackle five issues:

- “Promote strong, scientific food safety policy.”
- “Provide a salad bar in every school.”
- “Ensure a legal and stable workforce.”
- “Maintain a balance between employers and labor in the workplace.”
- “Reinstate the Mexican cross-border truck safety pilot program.”

Commenting on the five issues, Secretary Vilsack advised the United Fresh members to recognize that particularly in the case of divisive issues such as healthcare, immigration, and card check, the easy thing for Congress to do is to “kick the can down the road.” His advice was that “You need to thank those members of Congress for taking on these tough issues. . . They’ll need plenty of guts to take on the immigration issue.” In response to a tomato grower who said the difficulty of finding legal field workers may drive him out of business, Vilsack said “We have a broken system now and the problem is, it puts your operation in peril, it puts a lot of operations in peril, it puts a lot of people in peril. . . But to lance that boil will require political courage and political courage comes from folks like you going on the Hill and saying, ‘You know what, we may disagree with you on some of these issues, but we’re appreciative of the fact you’re taking on the tough issues’.”