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Administration explains food strategy at United Fresh meeting

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In a series of policy briefings this week, the “United Fresh Washington Public Policy Conference” heard Obama administration officials explain their government-wide strategy for the U.S. food system. Following Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack’s speech Thursday calling on United Fresh to join USDA in stepped-up efforts to promote better nutrition, FDA Commissioner Dr. Margaret Hamburg said Friday that “We really do need to overhaul our outdated and inadequate food safety system and now is the moment to act.”

Hamburg listed goals the administration and United Fresh both support: a prevention-focused, risk-based, science-based approach to food safety and nutrition “to ensure that best practices become common standards.” She thanked United Fresh for its years of work as “an important catalyst for strengthening federal standards and oversight to improve food safety.” But she also warned that none of their shared goals will be achieved “unless we can implement them with adequate and stable . . . funding for the long-term.” Unlike United Fresh which sees no justification for user fees to help pay for a more active FDA role, Hamburg said that there should be permanent fees for registering food industry facilities to supplement congressional funding. Currently, the Food Safety Enhancement Act, H.R. 2749, which the House passed in July and the Senate is due to consider later this year, calls for a \$500 annual fee for food production facilities, half the \$1,000 fee originally proposed.

United Fresh President & CEO Thomas Stenzel welcomed Dr. Hamburg’s commitment to building a far more effective food safety system. But he also warned the United Fresh growers, processors, distributors and retailers at the conference that while United Fresh supports significant reforms, “This is not going to be easy. We have an awful lot of work ahead of us. There are going to be changes that affect our industry at every level.”

Commenting on the work that lies ahead, Martha Coven, special assistant to the President for the White House’s Domestic Policy Council, said school meals need be upgraded with more fruits and vegetables to comply with the current federal dietary guidelines – and will need another upgrade soon when new dietary guidelines are released. As the mother of three-year-old twin girls, she said the nation “shouldn’t be jeopardizing” schoolchildren’s health by serving meals that lack proper nutrition. Coven also explained

that the administration is looking for ideas to develop comprehensive “community-based strategies for prevention and wellness.” She said strategies need to go beyond just better school meals and sidewalks and need to incorporate such changes in an comprehensive strategy.

Greg Nelson, associate director for energy, environment and technology at the White House Office of Public Liaison, told the conference that increased production of biofuels, including biofuels from crop and food processing wastes, “can be and should be an economic engine for rural America.” In response to a specialty crop grower who said his operations don’t offer opportunities for earning income from carbon sequestration, Nelson said the administration is carrying out research designed to create new opportunities throughout agriculture. He said the administration is determined to “make sure that what we’re doing on energy and climate change does not have negative impacts in other areas.”

For Secretary Vilsack’s remarks at the United Fresh conference, go to:
www.agri-pulse.com/uploaded/20090910H.pdf

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