

## Farm and rural leaders offer advice to Agriculture Secretary Vilsack

By Sara Wyant

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**(Editor's note:** State of the Union speeches, like the one that President Barack Obama is scheduled to give at 9 pm EDT tonight, rarely focus on agriculture and Rural America. We reached out to a wide cross section of 50 people from over 25 states, asking what they think President Obama should say tonight and what advice they might give on farm and rural policy issues. Those comments were summarized in this week's edition of our e-newsletter.

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As part of that short survey, we also asked what advice they have for Secretary Vilsack after his first year in office. Those comments are featured below.”

**Washington, DC. Jan. 27.** John R. Block, who served as Secretary of Agriculture under President Ronald Reagan from 1981-1986, knows how difficult it can be to work with the wide variety of interest groups who are impacted by hundreds of programs at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. But the former Illinois farmer also understands that the USDA depends on the thousands of farmers and ranchers who work the land everyday and produce safe, affordable food for millions in the U.S. and around the globe.

So when we asked if he had any advice for current Secretary Tom Vilsack after he has been in office for his first year, he answer was simple: **“Be a forceful voice for production agriculture and rural America.”**

**“There are others that will not agree with you, but you must build the support within the Cabinet and White House to win. It is time to ignore the extreme voices coming from the left,”** emphasizes Block, who now serves as a Senior Policy Advisor for Olsson Frank Weeda Terman Bode Matz



A little over one year ago, Marshall Matz, who co- led Sen. Obama's rural campaign effort and former Secretary John Block, who co-led Sen. McCain's campaign efforts “passed the corn” to symbolize the changing of the guard in Washington, DC. Both men serve as Senior Policy Advisors for Olsson Frank Weeda Terman Bode Matz.

His comments were echoed by other farm and rural leaders, including some who supported President Barack Obama during his election campaign. In general, the people who responded expressed frustration that the Secretary is not doing more to promote the benefits and opportunities from all types of agriculture.

“Sure we have our problems, like any industry,” wrote a Florida farmer who asked not to be identified. “But we expect our Secretary to be a champion for all of the good things we do and help us find new ways to address anything that needs to be changed...not bash us in the media.”

**“The Secretary needs to show USDA will stand up and be a strong advocate for growers. Secretary Vilsack should take the opportunity through the Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food campaign to tell the story that 95% of the food produced in this country comes from family farms,” says Darrin Ihnen, National Corn Growers Association President and a farmer from South Dakota.**

The Secretary of Agriculture needs to “be an advocate for the hardworking men and women that make American agriculture the envy of the world. It’s time to vigorously defend our industry from activists decrying modern food production and stand up to the Environmental Protection Agency and their pursuit of policies that will be detrimental to our ability to produce food, fiber and fuel,” says Charlie Kruse, President of the Missouri Farm Bureau.

A young Missouri farm woman, who asked not to be identified, echoed many of the same themes:

“Secretary Vilsack needs to advertise our hard working farmers more and the great job they are doing at using the advancements in technology to produce safe food. We need more assistance in telling consumers the real story of agriculture,” she explained.

Concerns over credit availability also loom large for younger producers.

“We need to let the farmers and ranchers do their jobs and support them by making sure there is capital available to help farmers in these difficult times,” this young farmer added. “Current rules and regulations on the books are requiring farmers to spend more money to produce their products but there is no guarantee on how they will pay for these increased expenses.

We need the Secretary to “Really listen to what family farmers are saying,” says National Farmers Union President Roger Johnson. “Design programs and propose policies that will help when help is really needed. Programs like insurance and permanent disaster are very important. Payments that are hard to defend to the public like fixed payments are hard to justify.”

### **Best interests at heart**

A Texas rancher tells us that, “Secretary Vilsack has the best interests of agriculture at heart, but I am concerned that he is not adequately taking into account the policy needs of farm and ranch families who rely on agriculture as their full-time profession. He needs to think more about what commercial scale farm and ranch families need in order to continue to produce food, fiber and

fuel and provide for their families in the process. He also needs to be a more independent and visible advocate for all forms of agriculture, particularly when it comes to new regulation and pushing back against the Environmental Protection Agency's and the Department of Labor's expanded agendas. Secretary Vilsack should also be a more forceful voice for passage of free trade agreements that would put more money into the pockets of America's farm and ranch families."

"The focus of the Administration should center around jobs, jobs, and more jobs," says Marshall Matz, a Senior Policy Advisor for Olsson Frank Weeda Terman Bode Matz. "The question is, how does USDA contribute to that priority? Expanding the timber program would lead to immediate job creation, as would rural development and broadband, all of which are underway.

In addition, Matz says the President has proposed the elimination of childhood hunger as a priority. "This is an important long-term initiative but it also provides an opportunity to work together in a bipartisan manner on Child Nutrition Reauthorization. The child nutrition programs have a long history of bringing Democrats and Republicans together. Perhaps it could rub off on other issues.

"One issue that will continue to pop up is food safety. I would encourage Secretary Vilsack to focus on getting agriculture out front --- help position the industry for the next 'crisis of the moment,'" says Ralph Grossi, past President of the American Farmland Trust and a California Farmer.

### **Lack of trade focus**

Several respondents lamented the lack of an aggressive trade strategy within the Obama Administration, an opportunity they say could create much needed jobs and help stimulate the economy.

"Get busy on trade!" is the advice of Kansas Farm Bureau President Steve Baccus. "That means get back to negotiating trade agreements that are USA friendly and work with the administration and Congress to quickly approve the ones waiting out there. Improving global trade will have an immediate impact on our economy."

Rob Joslin, American Soybean Association President and Ohio farmer, says, "ASA would encourage Secretary Vilsack to work with agriculture-based trade associations and companies to integrate the Department's efforts on domestic and international development with its traditional role in supporting producers and expanding foreign markets.

"The Obama campaign strategists and supporters of his rural agenda promised to expand opportunities for those producing for Main Street markets and those producing for global markets," says a Nebraska producer who asked not to be identified. "As farmers and ranchers continue to suffer from declining farm income, the only way to correct this measure is to seek meaningful opportunities in both marketplaces.

"Much of USDA's work to date has been to create short term programs and spending which address social wants and needs," this producer added. "It's time to think long term, and seek solutions which benefit more sectors of the rural economy, and recognize the need to include production agriculture in the long-term strategy." Perhaps most importantly, "It's time to take the party politics out of USDA."