



This is not your father's (or your mother's) USDA

By Sara Wyant

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Washington, Feb. 10. It's not unusual for a new administration to try to put its particular "stamp" on the way it operates and to promote programs that deliver on campaign promises to specific interest groups. As such, it should be little or no surprise that the Obama Administration, which focused on reaching out to small farmers and rural residents during the campaign, is trying to deliver on those types of promises at USDA.

One of the key challenges has been building trust with small and organic producers, many of whom collected over 100,000 electronic signatures on a petition against naming former Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack as secretary. The reason: they viewed his close relationships with so-called "corporate" agribusinesses in his home state of Iowa and support for biotechnology as more of the same, rather than the "change" that they voted for.

Naming Kathleen Merrigan as deputy secretary seems to have reassured small farm and sustainable agriculture interests that there is, indeed, a new sheriff in town with the appropriate credentials (see sidebar). **During the first few months in office, she has demonstrated her convictions by driving home "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food" as a way to integrate organic and sustainable practices throughout the department's programs.** She has been a key player in USDA's budget process, trying to drive more resources into community-based food and gardening efforts and promote organic foods throughout the agency.

In the process, **farmers, ranchers and many traditional USDA stakeholders are now worried that the pendulum has swung too**

Deputy Secretary Merrigan's background

Before rejoining USDA, from July 2001 until she was confirmed by the U.S. Senate as deputy secretary, Merrigan served as an assistant professor and director of the Agriculture, Food and Environment Program at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University in Boston. In 2008 she was an expert consultant to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations in Rome. Merrigan served as administrator of the Agricultural Marketing Service from 1999-2001. From 1994-99 she worked as a senior analyst for the Henry A. Wallace Institute for Alternative Agriculture, a Washington, DC-based organization which promotes research and education in sustainable agriculture. She was a senior staff member of the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry from 1987-92, where she worked as the chief science and technology advisor to then-Chairman Patrick Leahy, D-Vt. During that time she helped develop the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990. She worked on pesticide issues as a special assistant to the chief of regulatory affairs for the Texas Department of Agriculture, based in Austin, from 1986-87. Merrigan served on USDA's National Organic Standards Board from 1995-99 and on the department's Facilities Reform Commission from 1997-99. Merrigan holds a Ph.D. in environmental planning and policy from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a Master of Public Affairs degree from the University of Texas, and a B.A. degree from Williams College.

far and that they are no longer an integral part of the agency's focus. Despite Merrigan's pledges to represent all of agriculture, many of these interest groups feel that some USDA officials are now trying to drive a wedge between conventional and organic agriculture, rather than trying to build a stronger, more united food system. Not so, she says.

We asked Merrigan to respond to some of these concerns during our weekly Open Mic interview. To listen, go to www.Agri-Pulse.com or to download on your PDA, click here: <http://www.agri-pulse.com/uploaded/OpenMic020810.mp3>

The Deputy has a long history of advocating for change. Writing a chapter in the book, "Visions for Agriculture," in 1997, Merrigan took a stab at almost every traditional interest group in agriculture, as well as the House and Senate Agriculture Committees – where she once worked.

"The future of U.S. agriculture depends on reinventing government according to three principles: regulation, diversity, and democratic decision making. These principles will help farmers by ensuring market access and environmental stewardship.....To attain my vision of U.S.

agriculture, we must undergo a disruptive period of heavy-handed government reforms, followed by a true partnership between the public and private sectors," Merrigan wrote while she was a senior analyst for the Henry A. Wallace Institute for Alternative Agriculture, a Washington, DC-based organization which promotes research and education in sustainable agriculture.

Here are a few other excerpts from the book in an effort to shed light on the perspectives voiced by the upper echelon at USDA, prior to taking their current positions.

House and Senate Agriculture Committees should be abolished.

Urban gardening focus dates back to the '70s

At the urging of Rep. Fred Richmond (D. NY), Congress put \$150,000 into the 1977 Extension budget as an earmark for an Urban Gardening Program in 6 cities: NYC, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Houston and Los Angeles. Some lawmakers perceived this move as a really cheap way to get the urban congressional delegations to support the Farm Bill and most especially the Ag appropriations packages. In 1978, the program was expanded to the 16 largest cities (one in each state).

However, many Extension directors were not fond of urban programs and of not having total control over the funds. In the late '80's, ostensibly to protect the program from being taken out of the budget every year and the resultant lobbying of urban delegations, gardeners, a few farmers and city administrations, the program was folded into general Extension funding. With no more line item protection, many Extension directors took the opportunity to gut the program and use the funds as they liked.

"Most congressional decisions in agriculture are made in committee, with few amendments made on the House or Senate floor. This means that the agriculture committees control the agriculture debate. This often is a problem because of the narrow membership of the committees. Those who seek membership on the committees usually hail from the few remaining agricultural districts in commodity-producing states. It is unusual for citizens from Los Angeles or New York City, for example, to have a senator or a representative sitting on an agriculture committee, whereas the citizens of Bismarck, North Dakota, or Springfield, Illinois, expect to have such a representative. In the Senate, where representation is generally less parochial, the narrow mind-set of the agriculture committee is perpetuated because it is the smallest of all thirteen standing committees, leaving little room for anyone but the staunches "aggies" to join.

“It is time to shake things up in Congress. The agriculture committees should be abolished, with agricultural decision making given to newly constructed committees with broad jurisdiction and diverse membership, or to existing committees, such as those covering natural resources. Already, the labor and human resources committees have jurisdiction over legislation concerning Hatch formula funding for land-grant colleges because it is viewed as an “education” rather than an “agriculture” issue. In the same way, wetlands protection could be transferred to the environment committees, commodity programs to small business committees, “food for peace” aid to foreign affairs committees, and so forth. In this way, per-bushel prices no longer will dominate committee deliberations. Rather, the valid concern over commodity prices will be balanced with related agricultural issues such as inner-city hunger, environmental protection, and rural economic affairs.

USDA staff should be pared down, reconfigured:

“The sheer size of the USDA makes it almost impervious to the influence of sustainable agriculture and environmental groups. The commodity and agribusiness groups have staffs and budgets to canvass USDA employees and follow the details of administrative actions, something the nonprofit sector cannot begin to do. For example, the annual budget of just one large commodity organization exceeds the combined annual budgets of the top ten nonprofit organizations promoting sustainable agriculture. Moreover, years of commodity group and agribusiness lobbying have resulted in a classic case of agency capture. Sustainable agriculture, environmental, and other nonprofit groups simply are unable to meet with enough USDA employees to be competitive in the debate over agricultural policy.

“In the early 1990s much discussion occurred over the need to “downsize” the federal government. At the USDA this translated into a timid phase-out of eleven thousand jobs over seven years and reorganization of several USDA agencies, but no fundamental rethinking has occurred. Veterans of previous administration efforts to “reorganize” view the latest attempt as just another in a series of political exercises to convince voters that Washington is “doing something”.

“A real solution would require a review of all mission areas and a transfer of many activities to the states and counties as well as the private sector. Furthermore, severe cutbacks in staff are needed to pare the USDA to a reasonable size and allow administrators to reconfigure it to fit current needs. This must not turn into a “last hired/first fired” process but should be an opportunity to infuse the system with new ideas. The USDA is a classic case of an intractable bureaucracy. In large organizations, new staff members arrive with fresh ideas and outlooks, but often, years pass before they are promoted to powerful positions in which they can direct change. The result is that either they have long ago discarded those new ideas to gain acceptance in the organizational culture or the once-new ideas no longer are relevant. Clearly, the USDA’s staff must be reduced strategically. Civil Service protections insulate many workers from dismissal but do not prevent agency reorganizations that require staff dismissals, worker buyouts, or shifts of people within the bureaucracy. Concurrently, new procedures must be established that reward innovative thinking with the aim of changing a USDA culture that is open to too narrow a range of interests.

More involvement for nongovernmental organizations:

“Much of what the federal government does in agriculture would be done better if decisions were made in concert with nongovernmental organizations. Laws and regulations need to be rewritten to require innovative processes that bring together a broad array of private and public stakeholders in shared decision making, as exemplified in two significant programs. The USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Program provides grants for research and Extension projects to advance sustainable agriculture. SARE is unique in that grant decisions are made at the regional level by administrative councils consisting of scientists, farmers, Extension leaders, nutritionists, and others. In addition, SARE administrators make special efforts to hold forums to solicit the views of a wide range of interest groups. Similarly, the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), established to help develop national standards for organic production, brings outsider views into the heart of USDA decision making. The NOSB has fifteen members, including positions for three environmental activists, three consumer representatives, three farmers, one retailer, three food processors, one scientist, and one representative from a certifying organization. The NOSB is unusual in two ways: private citizens formally share power with the USDA, rather than having just an advisory role, and its membership ensures a balance of power and perspective between traditional agricultural interests and other stakeholder groups. Such public-private partnership should become the basis for much of USDA decision making.

“It is important to stress that government is not the answer for all that ails agriculture. Some of the most exciting activities will be community based; if government has a role, it will be to encourage promising community ventures and support them financially. For example, the growing community-supported agriculture movement is based on partnerships between food producers and consumers in which consumers buy a share of the farmer’s production. In designing sensible agricultural policy for our future, we need to ask a series of questions: Is the task performed better by the public or private sector? Is the task something that can be done in partnership between the public and private sectors? What level of government, if any, is best for the job?

Greater regulation needed for agriculture:

“At the foundation of my vision of a secure food system is a radically different notion of the proper role of government, one that in the short run involves greater regulation.....

“Stories of overregulated farmers unable to farm freely are far-fetched. The often-bashed and ominous-sounding “swampbuster” and “sodbuster” programs enacted in the 1985 and 1990 Farm Bills are decried by farm lobbies as burdensome, but even these are regulatory only in that farmers who voluntarily accept crop subsidy payments from Uncle Sam must comply with minimal conservation standards.

“Since farmers comprise the USDA’s main constituency, its reluctance to regulate is not surprising. But several other federal agencies involved with agriculture also give farmers the “kid glove” treatment. One example is the Environmental Protection Agency in its regulation of pesticides. Although pesticide law is supposed to protect health and safety, many environmental advocates and scientific authorities alike charge that the EPA’s regulation of pesticides is inadequate.

More focus on land-use regulation and anti-trust law:

“Everyone wants to help farmers. Pollsters remind politicians of this, pointing to surveys showing the public’s commitment to “family farmers”. But it is no longer helpful – or acceptable – to treat farmers and agriculture as sacred and therefore exempt from government control. Society would benefit from application of two time-tested regulatory efforts in agriculture – land-use regulation and antitrust law.”

“Two production patterns must be reversed if the United States is to have enough environmentally suitable land and water to meet our future food needs. First, aggressive federal government intervention is needed to relocate production regions for several crops. Second, crop rotations must be mandated whenever and wherever they can reduce soil erosion and agrichemical use.”

“The concentration of environmental degradation from agriculture suggests a much larger problem than can be cured by better targeting. Policymakers must confront the discomfoting reality that certain crops should not be grown in current production regions. For example, while the humid climate in Florida is suitable for fruit and vegetable production, it is also a perfect climate for many pests that are controlled only by heavy applications of fungicides and other toxic chemicals. Although the Florida Everglades has been home to the sugarcane production for decades, it is also home to many endangered and sensitive species. There may be no environmentally sensible way to produce many agricultural commodities in Florida. The same goes for the Central Valley of California, where production depends on irrigation involving high environmental costs.

“The second land-use pattern that must be broken by federal intervention is the destructive practice of monocropping.....including the need for heavy applications of pesticides and fertilizers.....Several actions could be taken. First, farmers are reluctant to forgo planting profitable crops in favor of sustainable rotations that return less income. To develop stronger markets for rotational crops, we need to encourage different eating patterns by having the USDA promote a varied diet complete with many legumes and other crops that fit into sustainable rotations. Second, we can provide market incentives or subsidies for crops that are beneficial in a good rotational system but for which market prices are unprofitable. Canola, amaranth, vetch, kenaf, and rye are just a few examples of the many crops that would improve rotational practices but need USDA assistance to become profitable on a large scale. Third, we can require farmers to rotate crops as a condition for receiving farm credit services from the government. Fourth, we can severely restrict manure and fertilizer applications to the point at which legume planting is the only reasonable way of adding nitrogen to the soil. Fifth, we can reform commodity and other programs that work against rotations, such as our research system based on a three-year grant cycle, which makes it impossible to plan rotational investigations that last much longer. Finally, we could require rotations outright for all production areas where it makes environmental sense. All these actions would get people, as the popular bumper sticker states, to “stop treating our soil like dirt!”

Concerns about ‘industrial’ agriculture:

Agriculture operates as a free market in that government does not control it. But the ever-increasing concentration of power in the food industry makes a mockery of so-called free enterprise, as farmers, businesspeople, and consumers find markets inequitable and difficult to enter. Few deny that the structure of agriculture is becoming increasingly industrialized. The commercials that punctuate political commentary programs on Sunday morning television brazenly boast one company as “supermarket to the world”. Farms are getting larger, markets are becoming integrated, and the “little guy” increasingly is finding himself out in the cold.

“Nowhere is this more apparent than in the livestock industry, where the message to producers is “get big or get out”. Confinement facilities housing three thousand hogs or more, cattle herds numbering in the tens of thousands and broiler operations of five hundred thousand birds are becoming the industry norm. Small operators find it difficult to secure the services of packing houses and distributors, either because they are dismissed as too small to bother with or because such services are owned by their large competitors. The four largest firms in the meat-packing industry control more than 80 percent of the steer, heifer, and boxed beef market, greatly reducing the flexibility farmers have in selling their herds (Welsh 1996). Large manure lagoons that accompany most large livestock operations create severe pollution problems. Rural communities are disrupted as small businesses close their doors when large operators bypass them in search of corporate-sized traders to fill corporate-sized orders. Concerns arise over the exposure of workers to toxic fumes and the exposure of communities to smells that extend miles from confinement facilities.

During an interview last year with *Agri-Pulse*, we asked Deputy Secretary Merrigan to describe herself and her operating style. At that time, she confirmed the importance of thinking “outside the box,” such as the comments reflected in that chapter of the book that we have referenced above.

“I tend to be analytical,” she explained. Whether as a Senate staff member or in her previous stint at USDA, “I really thought it was important to get diverse voices at the table and then run a transparent process. I may not agree with this person or that person but it’s really important for me to wear my rationale on my sleeve, so people know where I’m coming from. I’m a straight shooter. That sometimes got me in trouble, but I am who I am.”

#30