



Secretary Vilsack calls for more focus on Rural America

By Sara Wyant

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Washington, Feb.18. Calling for a “bold and innovative future” for the young people in the audience, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack told participants attending his agency’s annual Outlook Forum that he wants “people in this country to appreciate the value of rural America and give it more attention than they have in the past.”

“This country has got to get serious again about a strong, vibrant, innovative Rural America,” Vilsack emphasized. “Our country’s value system is centered in Rural America.”

Vilsack noted that the average age of farmers and ranchers is 57 and that fewer young people are moving back to Rural America. Speaking directly to student’s who participated in the Outlook Forum’s Student Diversity Program, Vilsack said: “They need you to go back there and help rebuild.”

Last year’s Forum was focused on rural development, but the agency dedicated the 86th annual event to “Sustainable Agriculture: the Key to Health and Prosperity.” The secretary outlined several new strategies the department is undertaking as part of that theme, including an “aggressive review of our food safety system” and an “amazing new opportunity for locally grown and locally consumed goods. The department’s “Know your farmer, know your food,” initiative is designed to create that link and expand local markets, he said.

Noting that it is “time for America to take back its energy destiny,” Vilsack said “We have called upon and we will continue to call upon the Congress to extend the biodiesel tax benefits, which he described as an “important support mechanism” for the industry.” The \$1/gallon biodiesel tax credit expired at the end of December last year.

During a press conference after his speech, Vilsack underscored the importance of using biotechnology and the need to do a better job of marketing the benefits. He said the agency is

embarking on a new approach, including more scientific exchanges and meetings to develop a “higher level of confidence” with those who are reluctant to embrace biotechnology. Vilsack cited three reasons to embrace biotechnology:

1. This science will allow us to better utilize water and other resources, reduce chemicals and use less pesticides.
2. With a shrinking land base, biotechnology will help increase productivity and help feed a rapidly growing world population.
3. Biotechnology is a strategy for adaptation to climate change and can help make crops more tolerant to climate related stress factors.

#30