

At beginning farmers conference, Vilsack urges ag to unite in joint effort

By Jon H. Harsch

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Washington, March 4 – Just before shelling out more USDA money for water-short California farmers, for cleaning up the Mississippi River Basin, and for rural broadband, and just before jetting to California to deliver the keynote address at Commodity Classic, Agriculture Secretary Vilsack mingled with a different crowd early Thursday morning. He was at a Drake University forum designed to link young, beginning and “begin-again” farmers and ranchers with USDA officials and non-profit organizations focused on smaller-scale agriculture and farmland protection.



USDA Sec. Vilsack addressing the Drake forum on helping beginning farmers. Photo: Agri-Pulse.

Vilsack’s message was that production agriculture and the organic and “sustainable” approaches favored by the crowd at the Drake University forum should join forces to pursue a rural renaissance. “Let’s not engage in this conflict in rural America,” he said. “We can’t afford this debate about whether big or small is better.”

Addressing the beginning and would-be beginning farmers at the conference, Vilsack told them that “for the first time, we have an administration that understands” and promised “a new day in rural America.” He said that after decades of young people feeling compelled to leave for big-city jobs to achieve economic security, “You don’t have to go elsewhere.”

Vilsack said “we have to look at the tremendous capacity our landscapes have for economic opportunity beyond simply crop production and livestock production, as important as those are, and they are important. But wouldn’t it be even better if we can improve bottom lines by making sure that those landscapes and the ecosystem markets

they can create and support are valued? Can we not create opportunities for water credit systems and carbon credit systems and land conservation systems?” He answered his own questions with the example of an Ohio community which avoided the high cost of building a new wastewater treatment plant by instead paying local farmers to install buffer strips and other conservation measures to improve water quality.

To replicate lower-cost, win-win conservation solutions like his Ohio example, Vilsack said USDA is coordinating and publicizing its wide range of programs and activities to increase overall effectiveness and impact. He said this newly integrated effort includes continuing export promotion programs and the farm program safety net. But he insisted that the new “strategic framework” he’s put in place at USDA to focus on rural revitalization is essential because “we’ve seen population declines, we’ve seen fewer farmers, we’ve seen less income, we’ve seen higher poverty rates, we’ve seen more unemployment, not just in the last couple of years but for the last couple of decades.” He also noted the costly political reality that if the rural population continues to shrink, rural America will continue to lose seats – and lose clout – in Congress.

To read about Vilsack’s new “Regional Innovation Initiative,” go to: <http://www.agri-pulse.com/uploaded/Mar0310H3.pdf>

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