



## **Sec. Vilsack defends USDA's FY '11 budget & policies from school meals to climate change**

**By Jon H. Harsch**

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Washington, Feb. 24 – In a House Appropriations Agriculture Subcommittee hearing Wednesday on the proposed USDA budget for FY 2011, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack displayed his mastery of policy details – and showed why he considers USDA “the every day, every way department” which deals with virtually every aspect of life in the United States.

In his opening statement, Vilsack covered issues ranging from “the most serious economic recession since the Great Depression” and “new approaches to strengthen rural America,” to reducing USDA discretionary spending by over \$1 billion while total USDA spending is proposed at \$129.6 billion for FY '11, up from \$119.3 billion this year. This overall \$10.3 billion increase, he said, is “primarily due to an anticipated increase in nutrition assistance program participation and mandatory expenditures for crop insurance.”

Then came the questions – and reminders from members of Congress that Vilsack hadn't touched on other issues such as ending U.S. restrictions on exports to Cuba, climate change and, as pointed out by Rep. Sam Farr (D-CA), adding salad bars to every school cafeteria and combating the latest pest threatening California's wine grapes.

In one exchange, Subcommittee Ranking Member Jack Kingston (R-GA) called on Vilsack to start charging children at least a nickel for every meal in USDA's school lunch and breakfast programs. Kingston said “you can start a child on the right path at a very young age and instill a work ethic.” That brought a mild but firm response from Vilsack who explained: “I wouldn't want to discourage participation in a program. . . It's already difficult enough to get parents engaged in this which is why we've seen a disturbing trend, the SNAP [Food Stamp] program increasing significantly, not necessarily seeing the same level of increase in our school lunch and school breakfast programs . . . We're actually looking for ways at least as it relates to this program, where we're assured that every youngster who needs help is getting the help.”

Kingston countered that “Food Stamps is at an all-time high, WIC is at an all-time high, 10 million people, so I would say you actually have a pretty good participation.” That

claim led Subcommittee Chair Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) to weigh on the divisive issue. She told Kingston that “This institution voted for \$256 billion in relief for estate taxes to people who make \$3.5 million or \$7 million a year. These folks are not struggling to put food on the table. They are eating high on the hog. The folks who are engaged in a Food Stamp program today can barely put food on their table.” Sam Farr added that no matter how well off a child’s family may be, that child is not charged for getting on the school bus or taking books out from the library.

Undaunted, Kingston returned to the fray, next raising his concerns about “EPA regulations on global warming.” He asked Vilsack “Have you studied what the EPA regulations will do to farmers, what’s the downside?”

Vilsack responded that “I think EPA is cognizant of the importance of agriculture and the importance of making sure that steps that are taken are not necessarily negative to the ability of agriculture to continue to produce the food and fiber and fuel and feed that we depend on. . . One of the reasons why I was supportive of efforts at setting up an offset program and system legislatively was to make sure that there were corresponding benefits as we look at trying to deal with issues involving climate change.” Vilsack said that based on studies he’s seen, “major commodity groups could in fact potentially be positively impacted by the offset program” which he said “could be an economic opportunity for farmers if it is structured properly.”

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