



Sec. Vilsack defends USDA allocations for food safety, farm programs & climate change

By Jon H. Harsch

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Washington, Feb. 24 – House Appropriations Agriculture Subcommittee Chair Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) asked Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack Wednesday to explain USDA’s plans to deal with the sharp rise in meat recalls triggered by both E. coli and salmonella over the past year. She charged that in the case of USDA’s Food Safety & Inspection Service (FSIS) which inspects meat plants, “I think we have gone too far in removing FSIS inspectors from the active role they had” and that USDA has moved toward “too much reliance on industry self-policing.”

DeLauro said she is “concerned that the proposed budget for FSIS this year only provides less than a 1% increase [\$7.3 million] over last year’s bill, aside from funding pay increases. Food safety is a very real matter of national security and I hope that we are using our resources as wisely as possible to ensure that American families are protected from sickness and harm.”

Vilsack said USDA is responding to the recent series of food recalls with a request for an additional \$10 million “to provide a strategy that focuses on prevention, that focuses on enhanced surveillance, on risk assessment, and focuses on recovery and recall.” He said the aim is to create a new public health infrastructure which will allow federal agencies to identify trends and “emerging problems” before they become serious.

Differences over how to allocate scarce dollars at a time of record federal deficits surfaced again when Rep. Sanford Bishop (D-GA) objected to USDA’s proposed cuts affecting farm program direct payments, cotton storage payments, and the export-promoting Market Access Program. He said such programs are part of the overall “safety net” promised in the ’08 Farm Bill.

Vilsack’s answer was that “We are in a slightly different circumstance from when the Farm Bill was passed” and that the recession has created “serious issues relative to the debt and deficit which we have to address.” He added that unlike USDA’s previous proposals, the latest plan to cut direct payments is “focused on a very small percentage of farmers. We calculate that of the 1.4 million farmers who currently qualify for direct

payments and things of that nature, only about 30,000 across the country are going to be impacted.”

Vilsack said that “when we talk about a safety net, we have to talk about the whole package and the whole package includes the research money that we put in, the export promotion money that we put in, the efforts in commodity purchases, and if you look at the totality of support, I think you will find that we indeed do have a strong safety net in this country and one that is fairly compliant with trade responsibilities.” Overall, he said, with the new proposed payment thresholds “somebody could make in theory about \$600,000 to \$700,000 and still get a check from the government. You know, if we are going to be serious about deficits, we’ve got to look someplace and this was one place to look.”

After Democrats voiced their concerns about inadequate funding in the proposed USDA budget for areas such as farm programs, export promotion, research, and food safety, Rep. Tom Latham (R-IA) raised objections to “increasing funding by over \$50 million for climate change research some of which would be used ‘to provide vital information needed for an agricultural and forestry cap-and-trade system’.” Latham suggested there should be better ways to spend USDA’s limited research funds.

Vilsack responded that “we have ongoing needs to take a look at how crop production will be impacted by more extreme weather conditions, whether it’s drought resistance and drought tolerance or whether it’s flooding situations, are there mechanisms and are there processes by which we can ensure productivity of seed in those extreme weather conditions. So I think it is important for us at USDA to focus on this. We also recognize that with these extreme weather conditions, there could very well be an increase in severity of pest and disease. So part of this research is taking a look at how we would be able to adapt to more serious pest and disease circumstances because of extreme weather conditions.”

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#30