

Tom Vilsack, Richard Holbrooke & Rajiv Shah outline new focus on agriculture in Afghanistan

By Jon H. Harsch

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Washington, Jan. 7 – In a special State Department briefing Thursday, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, newly sworn-in U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Administrator Rajiv Shah, and U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke announced a new commitment to revive Afghan agricultural production and exports.



Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, with USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack waiting to speak next during the State Department briefing. Photo: Agri-Pulse.

Just before leaving to visit Afghanistan, Secretary Vilsack explained in the briefing that “agriculture is the top non-security priority for the United States in Afghanistan.” He said “there is a tremendous opportunity not just in the growing of wheat but also in horticultural crops for this economy to be strengthened and for greater stability to be created.”

Vilsack emphasized that this effort must be “Afghan-led” and that USDA and other civilian

volunteers working in Afghanistan are “trying to listen to precisely what the Afghans need from us.”

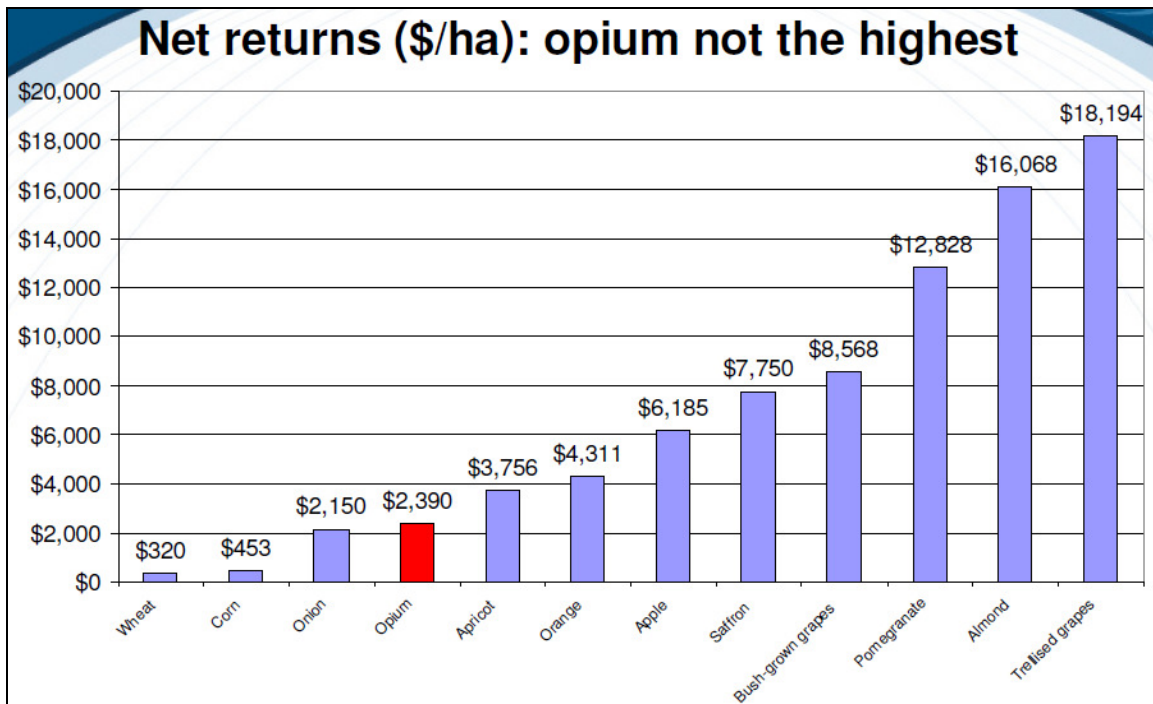
Based on discussions he’s already had with Afghan government officials, he said U.S. workers will be called on to deal with a wide variety of issues. “In some areas, it may be irrigation assistance, and so we’ve got teams of people working on creating irrigation opportunities. . . In some areas it may very well be talking about crop diversity and basically making the case that more resources can be earned by Afghan farmers as they

diversify their crops. In some cases, it may be working with Afghans to create some kind of storage opportunities so that the markets can be stabilized . . . In some cases, it will be focused on forestry because so many of the trees have been cut down and they need to be replanted.” He said that USDA and USAID will work with the Afghans, with land-grant universities and other organizations “to facilitate targeted investments in farming, increase productivity with new seed technologies, expansion of markets, building the appropriate infrastructure.”

Vilsack explained that Afghanistan “can be again the breadbasket for that area,” creating sorely needed income in rural areas and giving Afghans reason to reject the Taliban. Dr. Shah said the goal of the new U.S. mission in Afghanistan is “to have a vibrant and diverse agricultural economy, a more productive agricultural sector, opportunities for small farmers in particular, opportunities for those farmers to engage in higher-value production so they have sources of income and wealth and begin to rebuild their economy and their communities.”

Ambassador Holbrooke added that the new agricultural mission in Afghanistan is based on “a significant revision of the administration’s policies toward Afghanistan in the last eleven and a half months.” He said this has included ending the poppy eradication program to focus instead on “helping Afghanistan restore its once vibrant agricultural export markets.” He said it made no sense to “spend money to victimize farmers who were growing the best cash crop for them in the area.” The goal now is to show them how to make more money from growing other crops.

Vilsack pointed to what’s possible: “Roughly \$2,500 per hectare is generated from the sale of poppies [for the illegal opium trade]. But if that same hectare was put in table grapes it could be as much as \$18,000.”



Source: “Comparative Net Income from Afghan Crops” report by Gary Kuhn, Executive Director, Roots of Peace, September 2, 2009, at: www.rootsofpeace.org/documents/Comparitive_Net_Income_from_Afghan_Crops-Roots_of_Peace_Sept-2-2009.pdf

Vilsack said the challenge is “to not only educate farmers about those opportunities, but also create the credit and the transportation infrastructure that allows them to take full advantage of those markets.”

To help bring about this transformation, the Obama administration now has some 1,000 civilians working in Afghanistan on one-year contracts, with more civilian workers on the way. Holbrooke contrasted this number with just 300 civilians there a year ago, all on six-month tours. Holbrooke, Vilsack and Shah praised the civilian volunteers, including 54 from USDA, who are working on development projects in Afghanistan despite constant security risks.

Holbrooke closed the briefing by reading a quotation from Norman Borlaug, the Nobel laureate American agronomist credited with creating the Green Revolution: “If you desire peace, cultivate justice, but at the same time cultivate the fields to produce more bread; otherwise there will be no peace.”

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