

TESTIMONY OF KATHLEEN A. MERRIGAN, OF MASSACHUSETTS, TO BE
DEPUTY SECRETARY, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
APRIL 1, 2009

Mr. Chairman, Senator Chambliss, members of the Committee, it is a great honor to be nominated by President Obama to the position of Deputy Secretary. I am honored by Secretary Vilsack's confidence in me and his invitation to join him in leading the People's Department.

I appreciate Senator Leahy's generous introduction. He is an inspirational leader, a wonderful boss, and throughout the years, he has been a true friend to me and my family. I would like to also recognize my husband, Michael Selmi and my two children, Fiona and Seamus, who accompany me here today.

I am grateful for the opportunity and privilege to appear before you, to return home to the Committee room in which I worked with many of you, and your able staff, to craft legislation and oversee USDA operations. During my six years as a staff member for this Committee, I came to understand first-hand how essential it is for members of the Committee to receive timely, robust, and honest assessments from the Administration on issues before the Committee. For this reason, I want to begin my testimony pledging that, if confirmed, I will always prioritize answering the Committee's questions and calls for assistance. It would be an honor to join you in the common cause of improving the lives of all Americans because whether they understand it or not, each and every citizen needs U.S. agriculture to thrive.

It was from a distance, in my role as a college professor, that I watched as the 2008 Farm Bill took shape. It is a masterful piece of legislation, with its 15 titles, 600 provisions, and creative new ventures. As someone who cares deeply about American agriculture, I am grateful for the hard work committee members and staff devoted over a period of years to bring about this historic law.

During the 1990 Farm Bill deliberations, I worked to help Senator Leahy realize his vision for a national organic food standards program, which was included in that omnibus bill. My excitement soon turned to frustration once we began waiting for that law to be implemented, which took nearly 12 years. I do not want similar tales to be told about the 2008 Farm Bill. I understand that farmers and ranchers need certainty. In some areas of the country, farmers have already begun or are about to begin planting and they need to fully understand the programs that they will be utilizing. If confirmed, I understand that it will be my job to assist the Secretary and other leaders in the Department to ensure that this law is implemented as Congress intended and as quickly as possible.

The last time I appeared before this distinguished Committee two years ago, it was during the shaping of the 2008 Farm Bill. I testified on ways to improve what is now the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), a jewel among many wonderful USDA programs. What I like about CSP – your program Mr. Chairman – is that it recognizes

farmers as environmental stewards and rewards their contributions to healthy food, land, water, and wildlife. If confirmed as Deputy, one of my priorities will be to communicate the important contributions made by farmers and ranchers in protecting and enhancing our natural resources, such as mitigating climate change. As Secretary Vilsack has so ably articulated, we must harness our research enterprise to find ways to expedite the next generation of biofuels, develop new and market-worthy crop rotations, and advance the use of agroforestry and biomass strategies.

I teach at a graduate school of nutrition science and policy, where understanding the paradox of childhood obesity and hunger is central to our mandate. As Administrator of the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, I spearheaded efforts to purchase commodities for our national school lunch and breakfast programs. If confirmed as Deputy, I will seize the opportunity to work with the Committee to assist your efforts to reauthorize the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act this year. It is my goal and my passion to improve access and delivery of nutritious foods - particularly fresh fruits and vegetables - to our nations' children. It is something we can do; it is something we must do.

American agriculture must remain competitive. To this end, creative and supportive marketing programs and science-based regulations are essential. Investments in science and research must be made, but these investments will yield greater results if they are targeted, monitored, and evaluated.

I also believe that a strong farm safety net must be maintained to uphold and honor those men and women who persevere, despite the odds, and work hard every day to deliver wholesome safe food to people around the world.

Food safety must be enhanced and export opportunities sought. As this Committee knows all too well, rural Americans are not immune from the current economic upheaval and USDA must continue to find ways to assist small towns and rural communities and amplify food assistance programs to meet needs in all corners of the country. In short, the challenges before us are great but so too are the opportunities.

If confirmed, I am also looking forward to working with Secretary Vilsack and this Committee to get to the bottom of several key challenges before the Department today – resolving decade old civil rights complaints, modernizing an outdated information technology system, and transforming the Forest Service into a 21st century agency.

The Secretary has also stated his resolve to help farmers, ranchers, and rural Americans to reduce their dependence on foreign oil. This Committee has authorized major opportunities for rural America to participate in this effort through the Farm Bill energy title. I am looking forward to working to quickly implement the energy title programs such as Repowering Assistance and REAP. Those programs combined with other USDA initiatives such as Value Added and MicroEnterprise loans and grants will allow rural communities to develop new and exciting economic opportunities and to continue to play a central role in the effort to achieve energy independence.

I want to express my gratitude to the Chairman, the Ranking Member, and the Committee for the opportunity to appear before you today. Again, I want to thank President Obama for the confidence he has placed in me to do this job. Lastly, I want to thank my husband Michael Selmi whose willingness to stand by me and support me in this endeavor has allowed me to embrace this important new challenge.