

TESTIMONY OF GOVERNOR TOM VILSACK

SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY

Wednesday, January 14, 2009

Thank you, Chairman Harkin, Senator Chambliss, and members of the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry for the opportunity and privilege to appear before you today. I particularly want to thank my fellow Iowans Chairman Tom Harkin and Senator Chuck Grassley, for their kind introduction. I have long admired your work and service to our state and our country, and I appreciate your kind words today. I also want to take this opportunity to introduce to the Committee and to proudly thank my best friend and life partner, Christie Vilsack, who joins me today as she has during every step of my public life: as the mayor of Mt. Pleasant, as an Iowa state senator, and as Governor of the great state of Iowa.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, it is a great honor and privilege to be nominated by President-elect Obama to lead the Department of Agriculture at this crucial time. The last Iowan asked to serve as Secretary of Agriculture was Henry Wallace. He served with extraordinary distinction during a period of historic challenges. I am very mindful of the high standard he set, the reforms he initiated, and the deep compassion he had for those who work our lands.

Today our country and the Department of Agriculture again face historic challenges. Farmers and ranchers experience volatile markets while credit tightens. Small towns and rural communities continue to lose people and jobs while critical infrastructure crumbles. These towns and communities find it increasingly difficult to keep pace with the ever-changing national and global economy. Recent economic woes caused a dramatic increase in the number of Americans needing the food assistance programs under USDA jurisdiction. The nation looks to our rural areas for a sustainable source of food and energy at the same time the world looks to America for leadership in combating global climate change. The health care crisis aligns squarely with the need to promote more nutrition in our diets. All this is happening while the world population continues to grow at a rate that may in our lifetimes challenge our capacity to grow and raise enough food. If this weren't enough, a national treasure – our forests – are under attack by uncontrollable wildfires and invasive species.

All of these are serious challenges that require a compelling new vision for the Department with the attention, dedication, and leadership to make it happen. The President-elect has called upon each of us to meet these challenges. If confirmed, I pledge to work with all the energy I have to do my part to make sure the Department of Agriculture does its part:

- To administer a robust farm safety net and create real and meaningful opportunities for farmers and ranchers to succeed;

- To guarantee that the communities where those farmers and ranchers live can grow and prosper;
 - To help families that struggle to make ends meet put food on the table;
 - To place America at the forefront of efforts to aggressively address energy independence and global climate change;
 - To enhance the safety of the food supply and reduce the incidence of foodborne illness;
 - To work with those who seek programs and practices that lead to more nutritious food produced in a sustainable way; and
- To preserve and protect our national resources – our land, water, and forests.

I am under no illusion about the difficulty we face, but I also recognize the commitment Congress has made with the passage of the 2008 Farm Bill. USDA's job is to implement that far-ranging piece of legislation promptly and consistent with congressional intent. If confirmed, I will commit to work immediately to implement the 600 programs and 15 titles of the Farm Bill, including prompt implementation of the Conservation Stewardship Program and Disaster Payment Programs, and to leverage the financial commitment of the stimulus bill with other public sector and private resources to realize the full promise of rural America.

None of this will be possible without 21st century technology. We need to provide Congress with a workable and realistic plan to implement the technology changes necessary to bring the Department into the 21st century. If confirmed, I look forward to working with you to do just that.

I will also take steps to enhance the role of the farm sector and rural communities in solving the great environmental and energy-related challenges our country faces. Toward that end, I will work with you to expand opportunities for farmers, ranchers, and rural communities to promote renewable energy technologies like biofuels, wind, solar, and geo-thermal, and to deliver environmental benefits like clean air, clean water, and fish and wildlife habitat.

One final comment, with the time you have provided me: the Department of Agriculture was founded by President Lincoln as "The People's Department." The time has come for the Department to be the Department for All the People, by working hard to resolve outstanding civil rights claims in program and employment practices. We need to close this chapter of the past and look forward. If I'm confirmed, the message will be clear: discrimination in any form will not be tolerated.

I want to close by finishing where I began – by expressing my gratitude to the Chairman, the Ranking Member, and the Committee for the chance to speak today; to President-elect Obama for the confidence he has placed in me to do the job; to my family, Christie, Jess, Kate, and Doug, for their love and support; and to the people of my home state for the privilege they afforded me to serve them.