

Testimony of Dr. Catherine E. O'Connor Woteki
Nominee to be Under Secretary of Agriculture
For Research, Education and Economics
Before the Senate Agriculture Committee
May 27, 2010

Good morning, Madam Chairman, Senator Chambliss and members of the Committee. I am pleased and honored to appear before you today as President Obama's nominee to the position of Under Secretary for Research, Education and Economics in the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Since I left government service nine years ago, I have had many opportunities to meet with high school and college students and to talk with them about their career aspirations as well as their worries about their families, communities and their more general concerns about the future of the planet. I have steered them to consider studying the agricultural sciences – from the traditional disciplines like agronomy and animal science to food science and human nutrition to new majors that are being created in Colleges of Agriculture on the cutting edge of molecular biology and climate change. I frequently refer to the day's newspaper and show how the headline stories relate to agriculture – either how agriculture production or food safety are impacted by the story, or how agriculture science can be part of the solution to the problem under discussion. My counsel to students is based on my firm belief in the importance of the agricultural sciences to America's future – our economic, energy and national security, the healthfulness and safety of our food supply, and the quality of our environment – and on recognition that the world looks to America's research as necessary for international food security.

The Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008 also recognized the central importance of agriculture research, education and extension programs to America's future and set a new course for USDA's science and education programs. Much has been accomplished since enactment of the law, and much remains to be done to bring the vision established by the Congress to a robust reality. If confirmed, I look forward to working with Secretary Vilsack and with Dr. Roger Beachy, head of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture and a world-renowned expert in plant biology, to fulfill the Congress's vision to advance knowledge for agriculture, the environment, human health and well-being, and communities through integrated research, education and extension programs. I would also look forward to fulfilling the dual responsibilities of the post of Chief Scientist – assuring that Secretary Vilsack and President Obama receive scientific advice to inform policy decisions, and assuring the efficient use of resources, knowledge sharing and cooperation across agencies in the Federal government with interests in agricultural science.

Should I be confirmed, I will bring to this position dedication to scientific excellence, a track record of contribution to science-based policies, focus on science-based solutions, commitment to an efficient infrastructure, and experience in administering large, complex programs. The agencies in the REE mission area – the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, the Agricultural Research Service, the Economic Research Service, and the National Agricultural Statistics Service – are recognized globally as centers of excellence in their respective scientific fields. When compared to other research institutions on the basis of research publications, citations and patents, ARS is ranked as the premiere agricultural research institution in the world. If

confirmed to the position of Under Secretary for REE, my highest priority will be maintaining and enhancing the excellence of the programs these agencies administer.

I would also bring to this position a track record of contributing to science-based policy decisions. As Director, and later Chair, of the Food and Nutrition Board of the Institute of Medicine, I was responsible for a program of studies on human nutrition and food safety conducted at the request of federal agencies and providing research-based recommendations to inform the agency's policy decisions. As the first Under Secretary for Food Safety, I oversaw the implementation of the science- and risk-based HACCP inspection system for meat and poultry. During my tenure there, we introduced the risk assessment paradigm into FSIS's regulatory development process. More recently, I have had the opportunity to serve on the FDA Science Board and to participate in several committees of the National Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Medicine, responding to government agencies' requests for scientific review and providing recommendations to address their current policy issues.

I am committed to obtaining the highest impact we can achieve from the investment that the American people make in agricultural research and to assure that the research infrastructure is efficient and responsive to farmers' needs. That means focusing on our country's highest priorities, leveraging external resources, and providing the oversight to assure that the REE agencies are following through on their plans and commitments. If confirmed, I will continue to place high priority on the crop, livestock and production systems research that farmers rely on, and to enhance the partnerships with universities and federal agencies that will assure future success for America's farmers.

Finally, from my current experience as Global Director for Scientific Affairs at a large, multinational food company and as former Dean of Agriculture at Iowa State University and former Deputy Under Secretary for Research at USDA, I bring extensive experience in administering large, complex research organizations. The agenda for change laid out in the 2008 farm bill has much yet to be done, and should I be confirmed I am committed to seeing its vision for the future accomplished in an efficient and transparent manner.

Madam Chairman, I want to conclude by thanking President Obama and Secretary Vilsack for their confidence in me and by thanking you and the members of this Committee for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.