

Memo: "Hearing to Examine the Nomination of Thomas J. Vilsack, of Iowa, to be Secretary of Agriculture"

The Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry

Date: 2/2/2021

On Tuesday, February 2, The Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry held a hearing to examine Tom Vilsack's nomination to be the Secretary for Agriculture. This hearing's purpose was to allow Vilsack to talk about his priorities and expand on both his experience and goals for the USDA should he serve again as Secretary. Many Senators applauded his work as a Secretary during the Obama administration and believe this will be a quick confirmation process. The majority of the Senators' questions fell into the categories of climate change, food security, trade, and USDA programs with the overarching theme of COVID-19 pandemic response.

**Witnesses**

* *The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack*

**Members in Attendance**

Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), Sen. Michael Bennet (D-CO), Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-OH), Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-VT), Sen. Bob Casey Jr. (D-PA), Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), Sen. Tina Smith (D-MN), Sen. John Boozman (R-AR), Sen. Cindy Hyde-Smith (R-MS), Sen. John Hoeven (R-ND), Sen. Joni Ernst (R-IA), Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-IA), Sen. Deb Fischer (R-NE), Sen. Mike Braun (R-IN), Sen. John Thune (R-SD)

**Key Themes**

Climate Change

The Hon. Vilsack mentioned the importance of climate change action during his opening statements and all that can happen through it as a vehicle for new markets, incentives, and collaboration with farmers for input. He believes climate policy should be a part of the solution for helping farmers, not a part of the problem. Sen. Boozman wanted to ensure the Hon. Vilsack will fight for agriculture as President Biden pushes forward with his broad environmental goals and received a response expanding on farmers' benefits through these goals. These include biobased manufacturing opportunities, incentives for cover crops, no-till, and soil health efforts, the discovery of new products created using agricultural waste, methane capture and reuse benefits, quantifiable water quality results, and support in markets for carbon sequestration. Sens. Stabenow, Braun, and Hoeven requested more details about carbon sequestration among other climate plans and the Hon. Vilsack talked about a plan to create an advisory group of farmers to ask for advice on creating this incentivized effort while helping farmers gather necessary data. The Hon. Vilsack and Sen. Hoeven agreed that the CCC should fund farm bill programs first, and then additional funds should help inform future farm bills.

Sen. Brown and the Hon. Vilsack discussed Congress's allowance of states to reimburse 90% of high priority program costs. Many states decline to sign up, which could be helped through meetings with governors on the importance of decreasing soil overfertilization, increasing productivity, and more. Sen. Bennet mentioned the importance of national forests in carbon capture and the large role as both natural infrastructure and locations that should be protected.

The Hon. Vilsack also went into more detail on biofuel utilization across sister agencies to the USDA, stating the future of biofuels is bright due to their role in reducing emissions in response to questions from Sens. Klobuchar and Thune. Sen. Ernst's biofuel concern related to the Executive Order (EO) to change the federal fleet to electric vehicles but was satisfied by a response that both electric and biofuel capabilities need expansion. The Hon. Vilsack mentioned the reality of combustible engines remaining for decades, and increase biofuel is necessary. He also responded to Sen. Grassley's question on the use of CCC funds for biofuel by saying Secretary Perdue left unused infrastructure funds and other routes to assist biofuel producers negatively affected by the pandemic.

Trade

Sen. Boozman's first question was on agriculture as a priority in trade agreements, and the Hon. Vilsack responded that the new USTR is aware USDA needs to be a part of trade conversations and will work collaboratively to promote agriculture if confirmed. He also said a stable and secure trade policy, expanded Southeast Asia markets, and new domestic markets are all-important with an emergency safety net like crop insurance in case of emergency. Sen. Hyde-Smith's questions on countervailing duties and the wood products industry received similar answers to the previous response about communication to sister agencies and increased innovation. The Hon. Vilsack helped alleviate Sens. Hoeven's and Boozman's concern about frozen CFAP funding by agreeing to a quick review to release the funds. He also talked about adding resiliency to the supply chain through increasing opportunities to smaller farmers with institutional purchasing and communication with the DOJ about broader antitrust issues. Sen. Grassley said how important it is to close loopholes and cap payouts for crop insurance that allow larger farms to abuse the insurance safety net.

Sens. Hoeven, Fischer, Grassley, Braun, and Thune all expressed concern about the integrity of the cattle market and supply chain as well as the limited number of packers. The conversations talked about working with the DOJ on cattle antitrust matters, finding WTO compliant labeling, and having more price discovery. Sen. Gillibrand asked similarly for dairy, and the response was about considering the value of exports in milk dairy pricing and utilizing regional food systems paired with value-added facilities.

Food Security

Sen. Boozman highlighted the prevalence of food insecurity in the US and the need for trade mitigation assistance, pandemic assistance, and disaster assistance during his opening statements. The Hon. Vilsack believes nutrition assistance needs not only to be promoted but expanded to give Americans food and nutrition security. He also said the USDA needs to do a better job of educating individuals on what nutrition programs are and do as well as tie them to separate, but similar programs for increased involvement after Sen. Sherrod asked about WIC and other nutrition programs. Sens. Casey and Gillibrand added to this question that more food assistance, like the recent EO gives, is necessary, and the witness agreed there is a need for expanded access and increased benefits. Sen. Leahy mentioned that the Farm to Family boxes are helpful but would be more beneficial if they utilized local foods and commodities for rural areas.

USDA Programs

Sen. Hoeven pointed out the importance of the Quality Loss Assurance (QLA), Wildfire and Hurricane Indemnity Program Plus (WHIP+), and Rural Innovation Stronger Economy (RISE) programs in helping farmers. Sen. Bennet talked about rural issues in infrastructure and beyond and asked how the witness would make rural options easier, to which the Hon. Vilsack spoke about increasing technological access and technical assistance to let people know how and what is available to use. Sen. Smith and the Hon. Vilsack emphasized the importance of equity in USDA programs and that a deeper dive is needed to identify barriers and inequity within programs to ensure a diverse workforce and equal access to programs for all.

Research

The Hon. Vilsack believes the need for research on carbon sequestration, increased productivity, and more are vital to solving many agricultural issues. Land-grant universities are a gift and deserve full utilization. Sens. Stabenow, Klobuchar, and Fischer agree that data and research are critical. Sen. Klobuchar mentioned a 2018 farm bill provision related to animal vaccine and vet countermeasures vaccine bank and the importance of capacity and research to detect and beat future diseases. Sen. Fisher and the witness also agreed that innovation is critically important from competitive and safety standpoints.