

High Plains Journal

Ag Leaders in War of the Words

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By Larry Dreiling

Recently Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack laid out a new strategy for U.S. Department of Agriculture policy before the House Agriculture Committee.

The new Vilsack paradigm would place USDA policies away from traditional farm support programs and toward five areas:

- Broadband;
- Renewable energy and biofuels;
- Regional food systems and supply chains;
- Forest restoration and private land conservation; and
- Ecosystem market incentives.

The current system of farm support payments, Vilsack contended, has done little to stop population declines in rural America.

Republicans, particularly House Agriculture Committee Ranking Minority Member Frank Lucas of Oklahoma, criticized Vilsack's idea, with Lucas saying Vilsack's proposed new USDA focus threatens to turn regions of the U.S. currently dominated by production agriculture into "bedroom communities."

Shortly after Lucas' statement, members of the North American Agricultural Journalists met with Vilsack, who came out swinging against Lucas--and NAAJ members who questioned Vilsack on the issue--presumably for not getting on his side of the argument to back the Obama administration's proposals.

"That's total nonsense. Total nonsense," Vilsack called Lucas' statements. "What is a bedroom community? What is that? That is the suburb of an urban center. That's not what we're talking about here. What we're talking about is establishing a biorefinery in a town of 8,000 people that can help them employ the 15 to 20 people to build it, 10 or 15 people to run (it), and supplies the local producers in the area to take what might have been waste products and to refine it and sell it.

"That refinery may, in turn, create by-products, which can be used by farmers in the area. It creates trucking jobs, railroad jobs, new power requirements that utility companies have to meet, so they'll have to build new transmission lines. It means new renewable energy resources. I mean, it is about a renaissance of the rural economy. It's not about bedroom communities."

Vilsack continued his attack on Lucas, saying: "You know, it's interesting that the guy who asked me that question--the No. 2 county in the country for increased poverty and unemployment--it's in his district."

Then Vilsack lit into the NAAJ members.

"I'm telling you, folks, if you all are just going to focus on traditional ways of dealing with this, you're not going to break out of the mold," Vilsack said. "The first two questions--one on direct payments, the next on exports. We've doubled exports over the last 10 years and increased payments, and we're still losing farmers. Just keep that in mind.

"We have got to start paying attention to this stuff, OK? This is not about Republican or Democrat. This is about the country not paying attention to a very important part of its core. Ten years from now, you want to meet back here, and what will the charts show? Will they show fewer people living in rural America? Will it show a wider gap in per-capita income? Is it going to show an increased level of poverty?

"Is that what you want? Is that what you want? How many people will be paying for your publication when there's nobody living in rural America?"

Clearly exasperated at the line of questioning, Vilsack added: "We are talking to ourselves. We've got to talk to people in urban centers about why it's not just important for us but for them. It's the source of their food, their fiber, an ever-increasing amount of their fuel and their water."

Asked then about arguments concerning the connection between cuts in support payments to conventional producers, who grow about 80 percent of the nation's food supply, and how profitable producers can mean prosperous rural communities, Vilsack said that payments actually have increased and so have exports, but the number of farmers has declined.

"Why? Farmers are more productive," Vilsack said. "What happens when you're more productive? You don't need as many. So you have to have an economy that is an overlay of that system and is a companion to production agriculture that provides more opportunities to the smaller producers to stay in business.

"This allows the smaller producer to have more diversification to have places where they can benefit, like ecosystem markets, conservation, hunting and fishing opportunities, water credits. There's a whole host of things."

"If all we do is focus narrowly on all that we've ever focused on, we're going to continue to see (population declines). How can anyone be satisfied with that? Why should we be satisfied with that? Why do we have to assume it's going to be that way? Somebody answer those questions for me."

Vilsack added that all previous programs have been tried and they've failed.

"When someone tells me that we need to establish a national effort to spread biofuel opportunities--that in a 12-year period \$95 billion that's not being invested today is going to be invested in rural America--why wouldn't we be for that?

"This is not about bedroom communities. It's about opportunities. It's about the dining room table, that kitchen table where Mom and Dad can tell their kids there are opportunities for them. That's not the conversation that's taking place today. You know it and I know it. If I have any vision, it's about that conversation with Mom and Dad talking to son and daughter or grandson or granddaughter."

Seated at a lunch table across from this reporter was Bob Stallman, president of the American Farm Bureau Federation. After Vilsack departed, Stallman told the NAAJ members that while he agreed the rural development efforts Vilsack addressed were correct, he thought those efforts shouldn't be at the expense of traditional programs. "We don't view this as an either/or conversation," he said.

Vilsack didn't either.

In his response during NAAJ's "parade of leaders" held the day after Vilsack spoke to the group, Lucas asked: "Are we going to have a farm bill that helps farmers produce food and fiber to meet the needs of this country and the world--or are we going to have a farm bill that focuses on making sure that people who live in the countryside can find jobs somewhere else, so they can drive to work every day and home at night and get our food from someone else on this planet?"

Lucas said there's always been interest in rural infrastructure.

"The ag committee has always cared about that. Haven't they heard of the Rural Electric Administration back in the 30s? We've always cared, but don't make us pick between conservation and commodity titles and so-called rural development and infrastructure programs. We have a right to have both."

The issue, currently being debated in field hearings of the House Agriculture Committee, likely won't come up in any hearing by the committee's Senate counterparts. Senate Agriculture Committee Chair Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas told the NAAJ that she and Ranking Minority Member Saxby Chambliss of Georgia have "too much on our plate" with the commodity portion of the financial reform legislation as well as new school nutrition bills to get farm legislation under way until the next session of Congress.