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U.S. Rep. Frank Lucas sees danger in Obama farm bill; Agriculture Oklahoma Republican says aid cuts will hurt rural areas

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By Chris Casteel

Rep. Frank Lucas on Wednesday questioned whether the Obama administration is planning to turn rural areas into "bedroom communities" by cutting back on traditional farm subsidies and focusing more resources on broadband expansion and alternative energy production.

In an exchange with U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack at a committee hearing, Lucas said the administration's plans for the next farm bill appear to leave out the safety net of price supports and payments many farmers need.

Vilsack said the administration wanted to provide more economic opportunities in areas where people were falling further behind their urban and suburban counterparts. In his opening statement at an Agriculture Committee hearing about the 2012 farm bill, Vilsack said rural areas were losing population and had lower incomes and lower percentages of college degrees.

"This is of deep concern to me — that we continue to see our rural counties losing population," Vilsack told the panel.

Lucas, R-Cheyenne, the top Republican on the House Agriculture Committee, said Vilsack's statement on the next farm bill didn't mention production agriculture.

He asked Vilsack whether the administration's plan was to focus the next big farm bill on broadband expansion, renewable energy production, regional food and supply chains, forest restoration, private land conservation and ecosystem market incentives — the "key areas" Vilsack outlined in his written testimony to the committee.

Vilsack said he expected the committee to deal with traditional farm programs and that the administration's proposals could be "an expansion of the safety net." Lucas said the administration has proposed cutting safety net programs in next year's budget.

"I think it's important for us periodically to recalibrate," Vilsack responded. The secretary rejected Lucas' suggestion that the administration was trying to move rural areas away from farming and turn them into "bedroom communities" in which people no longer were involved in producing food.

"This isn't about bedroom communities," Vilsack said. "It's about making them robust communities where young people want to live."

After the hearing, Lucas said farm bills — typically written every four or five years — are about giving farmers the tools they need to produce "the safest, most affordable, highest quality food and fiber" in the world.

The Obama administration, he said, seems to have decided that farming isn't important to the U.S. economy anymore.

"I personally believe the business of farming and ranching is important to our economy ... it's an honorable vocation," Lucas said.