

Just Who Is Tom Vilsack?



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When President-elect Obama named his Secretary of Agriculture recently, many undoubtedly wondered, just who is Tom Vilsack? A few may have remembered that he was once governor Iowa. Others may recall he was one of many who ran briefly for the Democratic nomination for president in 2008. Before his two terms as governor, he served as mayor of Mt. Pleasant and a state senator. But those of us with an interest in agriculture want to know more about the future secretary who will take office sometime after January 20.

Vilsack comes into this position of leadership at a time of extraordinary tumult for American agriculture. It has not only been battered by falling commodity prices and rising production costs, but is also in the midst of a debate over its role in both future agriculture and energy policy. The Agriculture Department must also deal with a sharp increase in the demand for food assistance during the current economic turmoil.

Both President-elect Obama and Vilsack are regarded as strong advocates of ethanol and other bio-fuels as a way to reduce the nation's reliance on foreign oil. And Obama and many members of Congress will be working on an economic stimulus package in which they will probably promote creations of thousands of new jobs tied to "green energy" industries, including production of solar and wind energy, issues that will also affect many farmers and rural communities.

One of the first issues that Obama and Vilsack will face is whether to grant requests for federal aid to the ethanol industry. Vilsack is known to be a strong advocate of combating global warming and developing alternative sources of energy. When he co-chaired a task force for the Council of Foreign Relations that group recommended phasing out subsidies for mature bio-fuels, including corn-based ethanol as well as reducing tariffs on imported biofuels like Brazilian sugar ethanol.

When he goes before the Senate for confirmation, he will likely face questions about farm subsidies and lobbying connections, in addition

to collecting agriculture subsidies. He has also worked for a law firm that has lobbied for clients with business before USDA.

Vilsack collected \$42,759 in conservation reserve program payments between 2000 and 2006. This is not considered a problem for Obama since he is more concerned with payments to millionaire farmers and large corporations.

He is a partner at Dorsey and Whitney, a Washington D. C. law firm and head of the trial department at its Des Moines office. Among others, his firm has represented the Southern Minnesota Beet Sugar Co-op, Solargenis Energy, United Utilities, Chicken of the Sea, the National Education Association, and numerous Indian tribes. The National Education Association, one of the largest teacher's unions, is involved with issues relating to nutrition programs overseen by USDA, although Vilsack apparently was not directly involved with lobbying with USDA on these programs.

Some observers see Vilsack as unsatisfactory to both extremes in the farm policy debates. Advocates of sustainable agriculture question his support of biotechnology and not being friendly enough of organic farming. Those who want to see current policies continued wonder is he is sufficiently loyal to current farm commodity programs.

When he was governor of Iowa, Vilsack embraced innovation, encouraging the use of farmland to produce energy from ethanol and wind power while promoting better treatment of migrant workers. He does have the advantage of governing a major agricultural state where small innovative farms are emerging.

On the other hand some democratic party members in the southern states that showed increasing support for Obama and his party in the election, are wondering why he did not select an agricultural secretary from a southern state. (You may recall that I proposed former Texas congressman Charles Stenholm for this post shortly after election day.)

Tom Buis, president of the National Farmers Union believes the biggest challenge facing the next agriculture secretary will be writing the rules for the 2008 farm bill. Buis, also mentioned as a possible agriculture secretary, sees Vilsack's Iowa background as an asset, because he knows the problems facing rural America. Δ

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