

# Secretary Vilsack Makes The Case For More Rural Development

*Outlines Priorities For A Broader Mission At USDA*

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Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack is a quick study. Confirmed just about one month ago, he can rattle off the acronyms associated with key USDA programs like he's been managing the department for years. Career employees say he's intense, focused and prepared with probing questions when they've been in meetings with him.

He's also very driven to change the department in ways that are consistent with President Barack Obama's campaign pledges. After just a couple of weeks on the job, he outlined his priorities in a letter to all USDA employees. These include:

- Promoting a safe, sufficient and nutritious food supply
- Sustainable agriculture policies
- Leadership on climate change mitigation and adaptation
- Building a modern workplace and workforce
- Support for 21st Century rural communities.

Whereas many previous secretaries focused on the "farm and food production" portion of the agency, Vilsack makes the case for a much broader mission for USDA. Words like "sustainable," "organic," "broadband," "carbon credits," and "civil rights" flow freely as he talks about his plans for the agency.

## A place for producers?

In fact, his initial speeches to some of the nation's largest commodity groups sounded so different that some growers told us that they didn't feel the new Secretary understood their part of the "food chain." But when asked about whether or not production agriculture would have a "seat at the table," Vilsack was unequivocal about his support for farmers and ranchers.

Vilsack is not from a farm, but as the former Governor of Iowa, he understands the key role that farmers play in generating not only food, but feed, food and ultimately, jobs and tax revenues. He sees the rural landscape much more broadly and appears to be looking for ways to interconnect all of the "dots" on the Obama agenda.

For example, he sees investments in rural development as a positive sign for production agriculture, rather than something that will take away from farmers and ranchers.

"To my way of thinking, if we have strong rural communities, that's good for production agriculture," Vilsack explained in a recent interview, because so many farmers rely on off-farm income.

## Off-farm jobs important

The 2007 Census of Agriculture, which was recently released, underscores the growing importance of rural communities to those in the farming community, according to a new analysis by the Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI). The majority of farm principal operators report something other than farming as their primary occupation.

In the Census survey, operators are asked to list their primary occupation, based on how they spend the majority of their work time. In the 2002 Census, 57.5 percent of principal operators listed farming as their primary occupation. However, in the 2007 Census, only 45 percent of operators listed farming as their primary occupation.

This trend is true across the country. In 680 counties in 2002, over half of farm operators reported an occupation other than farming as their principal occupation. By 2007, this number increased to over 2,000 counties. (See maps below. For the full report, go to [www.RUPRI.org](http://www.RUPRI.org) )

These off farm jobs held by farm operators are a necessary supplement to farm income, and in many cases make the difference in allowing a family to continue to farm at all. In 2007, 90 percent of farm household income came from off farm sources. This varies across the farm typology developed by the Economic Research Service. Among retirement, residential/lifestyle, and lower sales categories, which together account for over 85 percent of all farm households, off farm income supplements losses in farm income. Very large farms, with sales over \$500,000, account for 3.8 percent of all farms and derive 16 percent of household income from off farm sources. Even in regions where agriculture plays a large role in the economy, such as the Heartland and Northern Great Plains, off farm income contributes significantly to farm household income (79 percent and 69 percent, respectively).

"The astonishing shifts in the primary occupation of farm operators underscores what has been widely understood for some time – that a healthy farm economy is dependent upon there being a healthy rural economy," says RUPRI President Brian Dabson. "Investments in essential infrastructure, business development and entrepreneurship, and workforce education and skills are critical to the success of both." Δ

*Editor Sara Wyant publishes a weekly e-newsletter covering farm and rural policy called Agri-Pulse. For a four-week free trial, go to [www.Agri-Pulse.com](http://www.Agri-Pulse.com)*



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