

March 19, 2009

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

We are very concerned by recent comments you made regarding the President's proposed fiscal year 2010 budget request for the Department of Agriculture.

You recently stated that the upcoming reauthorization of the school nutrition program and the larger agenda of the Department of Agriculture is a choice between 30 million children or 90,000 farmers. We believe you could not be more wrong about the choices that will confront policy makers and we sincerely hope you refrain from pitting the needs of children against the men and women who produce the food, feed, fiber and fuel we consume every day.

The President's proposed FY10 budget request clearly illustrates the priorities of the Administration. In light of the bipartisan opposition accompanying the budget and the reckless manner in which the budget cuts support to farmers and ranchers, we believe several of the proposals need to be reexamined. Congress can reauthorize the school nutrition programs, provide adequate funding to meet the urgent needs of our children, while at the same time maintain the support we promised in the 2008 farm bill to U.S. production agriculture.

The FY10 budget proposed request provides a phase out of direct payments, one of our most trade compliant forms of support, to farms with sales above \$500,000. Of the 2.2 million farms in the United States, there are 120,859 with sales above \$500,000 representing 74 percent of all production value in the United States. Of those farms, the vast majority receive some form of government payments that will be impacted by the proposal. Furthermore, the \$500,000 threshold disregards the costs to produce our country's food, feed, fiber and fuel every day. As a former Governor of Iowa you obviously know that farmers have variable operating costs and in some years their input prices, through no fault of their own, often exceeds the price of the crop they deliver to the elevator, mill or gin. In fact, the \$500,000 limit in the budget proposal would easily hit a medium sized corn and soybean farm of only 1,000 acres. Any of your former constituents would tell you that 1,000 acres is not a large "corporate megafarm" or agribusiness in Iowa.

The farm safety net is one that is counter-cyclical in nature and exists to help farmers and ranchers produce the safest, most abundant and cheapest food supply in the world.

We applaud your comments about diversifying income opportunities for farmers through renewable fuels and value added agriculture, but your opportunities are only concepts at this point and cannot provide the needed support overnight. Producers cannot flip a switch and change their production methods. They have invested billions of dollars in existing operations upon which many others depend. Change must be thoughtful and implemented gradually so there is minimal disruption.

We think it is unfair and unproductive for you to attack the very farmers and ranchers who form the foundation of our rural economy. These farmers and ranchers who represent the vast majority of agricultural production deserve a USDA that will fairly represent them and not put forward false choices. USDA has responsibility for a wide variety of interests, certainly we should be able to advocate for one without vilifying another. We look forward to working with you on improving the farm safety net, but you should not confuse the existing safety net for one that is not yet designed based on highly speculative "green" payments or a cap and trade regime.

Very truly yours,

U.S. Senator Saxby Chambliss (R-Ga.)

U.S. Senator Thad Cochran (R-Miss.)

U.S. Senator John Cornyn (R-Texas)

U.S. Senator Mike Crapo (R-Idaho)

U.S. Senator James Risch (R-Idaho)

U.S. Senator Pat Roberts (R-Kan.)

U.S. Senator John Thune (R-S.D.)

U.S. Senator David Vitter (R-La.)