

Jerry Hagstrom



Vilsack wants ag to think small

THIS IS THE TIME OF YEAR when the various farm groups hold their winter meetings. And Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack speaks at almost all of them. But he rarely shows as much passion in his talks as he did on Monday when he spoke to the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's meeting in Washington about his commitment to improving the lives of small farmers, many of whom don't make a profit.

Perhaps that's because most of the meetings Vilsack addresses are filled with prosperous farmers who vote Republican, don't support President Biden, and probably didn't vote for Vilsack when he was elected governor of Iowa twice.

NSAC is different. The alliance of 130 grassroots organizations says its "vision of agriculture is one where a safe, nutritious, ample, and affordable food supply is produced by a legion of family farmers who make a decent living pursuing their trade, while protecting the environment, and contributing to the strength and stability of their communities."

And Vilsack didn't hold back. He told the NSAC members gathered on the campus of Gallaudet University that there have been three pivotal moments in the history of American agriculture. The first was Abraham Lincoln's creation of the Agriculture Department as "the people's department" in the 1860s. The second was the development of the supply-management farm programs under Henry Wallace, Agriculture secretary under Franklin Roosevelt. The third, he said, was the policy of Earl Butz, Agriculture secretary in the Nixon administration, to move away from supply management and encourage farmers to plant "fence row to fence row" in order to boost supply. He recalled the comments of Sonny Perdue, the Agriculture secretary in the Trump administration, who told a 2019 dairy expo in Madison, Wisconsin, "In America, the big get bigger and the small go out."

American agriculture has responded to that call for greater productivity, but the trade-off has been ever-larger farms, fewer farmers, and, according to a USDA study, a reliance on off-farm second jobs, spousal wages, and retirement benefits, even when farm income overall is at record levels.

"The pivotal question we face in agriculture today," Vilsack said, is whether Perdue's line is "the only option." He said he believes there is a way to move to a system that is profitable not only for the few but for the "many and the most." That system, he said, is to make use of the government programs that the Biden administration expanded or created through the American Rescue Plan, the Bipartisan

Infrastructure Law, and the Inflation Reduction Act, alongside the Commodity Credit Corporation, the line of credit at the Treasury that USDA can access to aid farmers.

Those programs, he said, can:

- help more farmers transition to organic production for which consumers will pay higher prices;
- sequester carbon, thereby generating carbon-offset credits that can be sold;
- sell more locally produced food to schools and other institutions; and
- turn manure into energy that can be used on the farm and sold to the electricity grid.

The administration, Vilsack added, will also help by making USDA programs friendlier to small farmers to avoid foreclosure and by creating regional business hubs to help smaller farmers and ranchers aggregate their products in order to make sales easier.

Vilsack said frankly that the combination of COVID-19, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and climate change had created a "pivotal" moment in which Congress was willing to provide a "historic" amount of money to help smaller farmers and rural America.

But he added that "some people want to take it away."

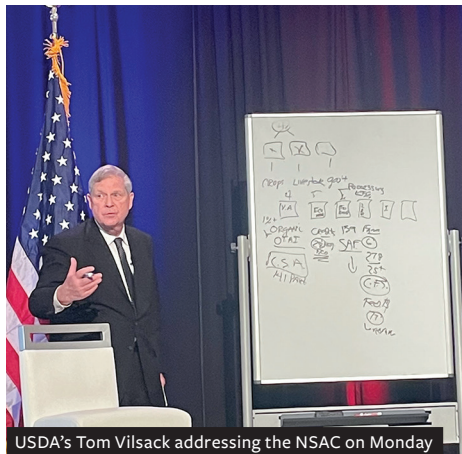
"We need you; we need you," he

said. "This opportunity needs you. I know that most of you have dedicated your life to something like this. I am here today asking for your help." The new programs, he said, should be "just the start, not the finish" of an effort to allow rural Americans to tell their children they have a future at home rather than urging them to move away.

Vilsack implored the NSAC members to remind the many new members of Congress who have not voted on a farm bill that big farms and fewer farmers have led to schools consolidating, downtowns being boarded up, and hospitals closing.

The new members should be asked, "Do we want a system that benefits a few, or a system that benefits the many and the most?" he said.

Vilsack was, of course, preaching to the choir, but his speech had an impact. NSAC policy director Mike Lavender said, "Vilsack outlined a forward-thinking vision of federal agriculture policy rooted in addressing many of the challenges facing farmers today, not the past." He promised that his coalition would help work toward those goals. □



Contributing Editor Jerry Hagstrom is the founder and executive editor of The Hagstrom Report, which may be found at www.HagstromReport.com.