



United States Department of Agriculture

Office of the Secretary
Washington, D.C. 20250

February 12, 2009

Dear USDA Employee:

It is an honor and a privilege for me to be asked by President Barack Obama to serve as Secretary of Agriculture, and I've appreciated the warm welcome I have received from the many USDA employees I have been able to meet thus far.

The breadth of the programs of the Department of Agriculture means that USDA will play an active role in the priorities of the Administration over the next 4 years. Every day, our programs touch almost every person in the country. We have a responsibility to make sure that these programs serve all of the people who need them and that they are managed in the most modern and efficient manner possible.

That presents us with great challenges, but also great opportunities. As a former mayor, State Senator, and Governor of Iowa, I was able to make advancements in rural economic opportunity, combating hunger and malnutrition, local food systems, family farm profitability, export opportunities, and livestock market reform. We did that by setting out strategic goals and empowering people to help us meet those goals. I intend to follow that same process at USDA, and I want you to know my priorities for the Department over the next 4 years. They include:

- *Promotion of a safe, sufficient, and nutritious food supply for all Americans and for people around the world.* We need a modern food safety system, and USDA will also play a key role in the public health debate. Our nutrition programs should strive to both alleviate hunger and prevent health care problems such as childhood obesity. President Obama has challenged us to eliminate childhood hunger by 2015, and as we move forward with reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Programs, we have the opportunity to emphasize the importance of healthful and nutritious eating.
- *Sustainable agricultural policies* that foster economic viability for small and mid-size farms and rural businesses, protect natural resources, and promote value-added agriculture.
- *National leadership in climate change mitigation and adaptation.* This will involve conservation and greater efficiency in energy use as well as new technologies and expanded opportunities in biofuels and renewable energy. We need to advance research and development and pursue opportunities to support the development of additional biofuels, wind power, and other renewable energy sources. I want to provide incentives for farmers and ranchers to use management practices that promote clean air, clean water, and wildlife habitat.

- *Building a modern workplace with a modern workforce.* We will focus on information technology and process improvements, led by an empowered and diverse workforce that reflects America and will bring the best ideas to the table.
- *Support for 21st century rural communities.* We will promote the expansion of modern infrastructure; broadband service; affordable, energy-efficient housing; expanded opportunities for small businesses; and improved quality of life through community facilities.

As we work to achieve these goals, we will be guided by the values that President Obama has outlined for his Administration: transparency, participation, and collaboration. We have an obligation to the public to make our programs as open as possible so that everyone can participate. We need to engage the public in conversation, discussion, and debate about policy decisions. In particular, we need to reach out to underserved constituencies and other groups who have been left out of the process, so that there is no question that the Department serves everyone and not just the special interests.

And you should not wait to be asked. Everyone has a personal responsibility to use his or her skills and expertise to modernize USDA systems and programs, improve policies, reach out to underserved constituencies, assure a discrimination-free workplace, and use Government resources wisely and efficiently. I hope you can look at every day that you come to work as an opportunity to make a difference—for the public and for your co-workers. It may be as seemingly small an act as turning off lights that aren't being used or finding other ways to reduce office expenses. For many people, you are the face of Government. How you act and interact goes a long way toward defining who participates in Government programs and policymaking and how the public views our stewardship.

Personal responsibility also means adhering to high ethical standards. One of my first acts as Secretary was to sign an Ethics Agreement in which I made a commitment to adhere to the high ethical standards articulated by President Obama. The President has clearly established the importance of ethical conduct in making Government credible and deserving of the public's confidence. I will expect no less from all USDA employees.

We have a big job ahead of us, and it will take a team effort to complete it. I am ready to lead the team and to support you in meeting our goals.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Thomas J. Vilsack", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary