

Rural people need to sell agriculture

Written by Mary Kay Quinlan
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LINCOLN—People who care about agriculture need to do a better job of selling themselves to urban dwellers, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack told a Lincoln audience Nov. 5.

“We’ve got to market agriculture differently,” Vilsack said, expressing frustration over the congressional logjam that has blocked passage of a new farm bill.

National news media have focused on crop subsidies and food stamps, Vilsack said, but the bill also contains critical support for research, jobs, international trade, food security, energy and conservation in addition to its role as a safety net for farmers who need the bill’s provisions that help reduce the inherent risks of farming enough so they’ll keep farming and assure the nation’s food independence.

Farmers comprise just 1 percent of the population, but one out of every 12 jobs in the country is associated with agriculture, Vilsack said, adding: “We ought to be talking about that all the time.”

Vilsack was the final speaker at a three-day conference sponsored by the University of Nebraska’s new Rural Futures Institute and by the UNL Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources’ Heuermann lecture series.

Vilsack, a former two-term governor of Iowa, said the pending farm bill is an opportunity “to remind all of America why rural America matters.”

In addition to providing all the food the nation needs, rural America provides critical exports, is the source of all the nation’s energy, from coal mines to hydroelectric dams, wind farms and biofuels, and is the place urban people go to get away from it all, he said.

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Moreover, Vilsack added, the nation depends directly on rural people for its national security because people from rural areas represent 40 percent of the military although they comprise just 16 percent of the overall population.

The agriculture secretary attributed the willingness of rural young people to join the military to a value system instilled in rural youth who understand the importance of giving back to their communities. It's a lesson, he said, that they learn from the land. "You can't keep taking from the land. You've got to give something back," he said. "The country's no different."

Vilsack urged people who want to enhance the rural economy to take their message to foundations and investment bankers as potential sources of new capital for bio-based manufacturing and new product development that will create more jobs in rural communities. He cited as examples a Virginia firm that is using plant material to make a Fiberglas-like substance and a Wisconsin manufacturer that uses wood chips to make a type of armor.

In addition to cataloguing the virtues of rural America, Vilsack also noted some shortcomings.

"Rural America needs to take a different attitude toward diversity than we've taken," he said. Hispanic workers in particular are a critical part of the agriculture labor force, Vilsack said, yet immigrants encounter resistance in many rural areas. Congress needs to create a "pathway to legitimacy" for them, he said, referring to an immigration reform bill that also has been stalled in Congress.

The agriculture secretary also noted that poverty remains a persistent problem in many rural counties and that it's often difficult for young farmers and ranchers without family land they can inherit to gain a toe-hold in agriculture. USDA programs aim to help young farmers and ranchers with loans and other support, and also help communities with support for housing, libraries, hospitals, schools and broadband access, all of which are investments that support the quality of life in rural America, he said.

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