



Consumer Federation of America

January 13, 2009

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Chairman, Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Harkin:

Consumer Federation of America is the nation's largest consumer advocacy organization. Founded in 1968, CFA represents over 300 local, state and national organizations, including consumer advocacy groups, consumer cooperatives, senior citizen, anti-hunger and food safety groups, and trade unions whose combined memberships exceed 50 million Americans.

CFA has long represented the concerns of these groups with regard to USDA's actions affecting food prices, food assistance, nutrition research, biotechnology, and food safety and has, on occasion, been critical of the Department's failure to meet President Lincoln's vision that it be the "people's department."

The scope of USDA's responsibilities certainly justifies that name. It is a diverse and complex organization that spends over \$95 billion taxpayer dollars annually, employs more than 100,000 people, and administers over 300 programs that affect the lives of every American.

The Department's leaders have, however, not lived up to Lincoln's challenge. They have often focused primarily on commodity programs and international trade, giving little time or attention to the other important programs they have sworn to execute. Occasionally, Secretaries of Agriculture have been unwilling to protect food safety, improve nutrition or protect the environment, steps important to the vast majority of Americans, because doing so would offend big agriculture, food manufacturers, and restaurants.

Earlier this year, we wrote to President-Elect Obama urging him to choose an agriculture secretary whose experience and philosophy indicated he or she understands USDA's larger role and would work to serve the needs of all Americans.

We noted the challenges that would face the new Secretary. He or she must address rising food prices; growing demand for food assistance during a period of economic crisis; a crumbling food safety infrastructure; and the obesity epidemic.

President Obama's nominee, Tom Vilsack of Iowa, was a successful two term governor of a state that is known for its agricultural industry but has a diverse economy. He was a full and constant supervisor of the state's economic growth. He recognized that all citizens must have a seat at the policy table and demonstrated an ability to hear the concerns of and work with different stakeholder groups.

Since his nomination, Governor Vilsack's statements have indicated he fully understands the importance of USDA's food assistance and environmental protection programs. He has committed to leading the effort to renew Child Nutrition programs.

We have not been able to find any comments or actions by Governor Vilsack, during his terms as governor or since, that speak directly to CFA members' concerns about the safety of the food they eat and feed their children. The Governor has not indicated how he will fulfill USDA's public health responsibilities. We hope that he will recognize and embrace them, vigorously enforce the existing statutes and support the modernization of food safety law and structure.

Based on his experience as a successful governor and his sensitivity to other USDA food, nutrition and environmental program responsibilities, we believe that, if he also commits the Department to a vigorous food safety program, it is possible that Governor Vilsack could become the kind of transformative leader that the Department of Agriculture needs. We look forward to working with him to achieve that goal.

Sincerely,

Carol Tucker Foreman
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The Food Policy Institute

Chris Waldrop
Director
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