

**Center for Foodborne Illness, Research & Prevention,
Center for Science in the Public Interest,
Consumer Federation of America,
Consumers Union, Food & Water Watch,
Government Accountability Project, Safe Tables Our Priority,
Union of Concerned Scientists**

December 11, 2008

President-Elect Barack Obama
Washington, DC

Dear President-Elect Obama:

The undersigned organizations write to ask that you appoint as Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture an individual who embraces the diversity of programs administered by the Department and accepts the responsibility for representing the interests of all Americans, urban as well as rural, consumers as well as producers.

As you well know, the Department of Agriculture is a diverse and complex organization with programs ranging from food stamps to forestry. It spends over \$95 billion of taxpayer funds each year and employs more than 100,000 people to administer over 300 programs that affect the lives of all Americans and millions of other people around the world. Production agriculture is only one of the interests of USDA, and by no means the largest.

The agenda waiting on the desk of the new Secretary will include issues of great concern that go far beyond the interests of commodity producers. The Government Accountability Office recently identified food safety as one of thirteen “urgent issues” needing the attention of your Administration. USDA has responsibility for assuring the safety of the nation’s meat, poultry, and processed egg supply and the Secretary must lead the way in addressing this urgent issue. USDA’s food assistance programs are vital to helping millions of Americans survive in this time of high unemployment and high food prices. One in ten Americans, most of them urban, are served by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), school breakfast, school lunch and WIC programs that constitute 65% of USDA’s total budget. National health leaders note the high personal and national cost of the obesity epidemic. USDA is home to most of the research budget on nutrition and shares responsibility for dietary guidance. Considering the contribution of the American diet to obesity, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, cancer, and other health problems, USDA must be more aggressive in promoting healthier diets. The Department also has major environmental responsibilities. Global climate change affects, and is affected by, agriculture and forest lands. Soil and water conservation require significant attention.

Frequently, the actions and funds needed to assure food safety, good nutrition, and environmental preservation have at least short-term costs for production agriculture, food manufacturers, and restaurants. Historically, the Department has often opted to put the interests of production agriculture and industry ahead of those other responsibilities.

We are concerned that many of the names mentioned in the media as currently under consideration for Secretary of Agriculture are individuals whose primary qualification for the position is their knowledge of and interest in production agriculture and commodity programs. It is critical that the candidate for Secretary of Agriculture have experience with or have been an advocate for USDA's nutrition, conservation and food safety programs and have had experience providing leadership to a large and diverse organization.

When the Department of Agriculture was created during the Presidency of Abraham Lincoln, he called it the "people's department." We urge you to return the Department to that role by changing its name to reflect its multiple missions. We suggest you rename it the Department of Food, Agriculture and Forestry or, simply, the Department of Food and appoint a Secretary who sees his or her constituency as all the people who eat as well as those who produce.

Thank you for considering our views.

Sincerely,

Carol Tucker-Foreman
Assistant Secretary of Agriculture
1977-81

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