

AgriTalk

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Mike Adams with Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack

Note: This is an unofficial transcript of an *AgriTalk* interview.



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Mr. Adams: We are broadcasting from the Case IH exhibit here at the Farm Machinery Show in Louisville, Kentucky. Very happy to be joined now, joining us by phone, is Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack. Mr. Secretary, a lot of farmers looking at the latest equipment here, can't wait to get out into the field. I think everyone has cabin fever.

Sec. Vilsack: Well, unfortunately Mother Nature is not cooperating. That groundhog in Punxsutawney should have seen its shadow or not, whatever it is, to shorten this winter; it's been a tough one.

Mr. Adams: It has been.

Sec. Vilsack: But we're excited about a farm bill, though, Mike, and farmers should be excited as well, that we finally got that piece of legislation through the process and signed by the President. We're now in the process of beginning implementation.

Mr. Adams: Yeah, we finally get to talk about the farm bill being finalized, being done, being completed and signed. Now, as you mentioned, the key is implementation. How is that going? How quickly can you implement this farm bill?

Sec. Vilsack: Well, I think it's important for folks to know that each title of a farm bill has rules and regulations and notices that have to be prepared and filed in order for us to be able to implement. And we've begun a process of prioritizing within each title what those rules and regulations, what is required.

I can tell you, Mike, that I've instructed our team to put a keen focus initially on disaster assistance. The reality is our livestock producers have waited a very, very long time for help and for resumption of these disaster programs. There are four programs in full that need to be looked at. A couple of them don't

necessarily require a lot to get implemented, but two of them will require us to go through a rule-making process. We want to be able to do that as quickly as we possibly can.

Mr. Adams: Will all of the farm bill be implemented this year?

Sec. Vilsack: That's difficult to say. I have not yet seen all of the titles and all of the steps. But I can tell you that there are literally hundreds and hundreds, if not thousands of actions that have to be taken. This is a 900 page bill, Mike, with lots of new programs and lots of new opportunities which make me very optimistic and hopeful about the future of agriculture and rural America.

Part of the challenge, Mike, is that we can get a rule prepared, but it has to be reviewed by our general counsel's office, it has to be reviewed pursuant to rules and regulations and law by our budget and policy folks, and then it has to be reviewed by OMB, the Office of Management & Budget, before it can be published. Then there are comment periods, and then if there are lots of comments, people ask for extension of comment periods, so it's hard to pin down in terms of having everything done in 2014.

What I will tell you is we will have it prioritized based on what we think is most helpful and most important to people on the farm, on ranches and in rural America, and we will systematically and as effectively as we can implement this thing, and we will be fairly transparent about this so that people will know where we are in the process. And as I say, I think the first order of business is gonna make sure that we get these disaster programs in a place where people can get help and assistance, because they've waited for, in some cases, a couple of years.

Mr. Adams: We're talking with Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack. What can you tell us about the Made in Rural America Export and Investment Initiatives we've been hearing about?

Sec. Vilsack: Well, Mike, I think, you know, part of what we've been able to talk about in agriculture is the great export opportunities that we've taken full advantage of, the last five years being the best export years we've seen in American agriculture. There's a corresponding opportunity for small businesses as well in rural areas, and these small businesses may be businesses that are taking what is being grown and raised on a farm, and waste product or residue, converting it into a new chemical, into a polymer, into a plastic, into a new fiber or material which they're currently selling in the United States, but they may have a market opportunity outside the United States. It may create jobs, it may create new market opportunities for producers.

And we want to make sure that we are fully focused on the rural opportunity of exports. Right now exports in agriculture support about a million jobs. We think we can build on that. And so what we'll be doing is working with the Department of Commerce, working with other federal agencies that provide help and

assistance, making it a little bit easier, a little smoother for companies to export and encouraging rural companies and businesses to think about that export opportunity.

Mr. Adams: So you'll be holding some forums around the country on this?

Sec. Vilsack: There will be forums with the Department of Commerce and an entity called the Export-Import Bank to let them know about various programs. There's an insurance program, for example, Mike, that the Export-Import Bank has. If you're worried about selling a product to, say, Vietnam, and you're worried about whether you're going to get paid on time as a small business owner, the Ex-Im Bank can basically give you assurance that you'll get paid within 30 days. They have a program to guarantee payment within 30 days. That's the kind of reassurance and certainty that small business owners need. They may not be aware of that program. That's what these regional forums will do.

We're also going to have a corresponding effort to encourage folks who are in investment banks who are looking for investment opportunities to consider investing in rural America, in infrastructure and in business development, because oftentimes these folks are focused on urban and suburban areas, but there's tremendous business opportunity in rural America. We just need to make sure we market it more effectively.

Mr. Adams: Mr. Secretary, finally, you're a strong supporter of biofuels, and the biofuels industry is waiting to see what happens, what the EPA announcement will be on the RFS levels. Are you concerned about any change in RFS being a setback or a deterrent for moving forward, especially for that next generation of biofuels?

Sec. Vilsack: Well, my focus, Mike, is to make sure that we have a healthy renewable fuel industry. I strongly believe in the industry, for a multitude of reasons. It reduces our reliance on foreign oil, it creates job opportunities in rural America, it provides choice for consumers, and it obviously stabilizes markets for producers. So we want to continue to have an RFS. We want to make sure that Congress doesn't repeal it.

We also want to make sure that we expand opportunities to use higher blends of ethanol, which is why one aspect of the farm bill that I wasn't particularly happy about was a provision which restricts us from using the Renewable Energy for America program for funding blender pumps, which would have allowed higher blends of fuel to be used. But we're going to figure out a way to use the other programs we have in rural development to encourage expansion of higher blends and marketing of higher blends.

We're going to look at the export market, speaking of exports. You know, there's no reason why we can't begin to tell countries that are interested in renewable fuel that American ethanol or American biodiesel is the fuel of choice, and that should

create market opportunities. We are, at USDA, anyway, not going to wait for whatever decision EPA makes. We're going to make sure that we are aggressive in terms of creating market opportunities. And we are hopeful that EPA will take into consideration all of the comments that they receive from all over the country about the importance of maintaining a solid renewable fuel industry.

Mr. Adams: All right, Mr. Secretary, thank you very much, and we look forward to talking with you as we move forward with implementation of this farm bill. Thank you so much.

Sec. Vilsack: Well, have a good time at the show. It sounds like it's the place to be.

Mr. Adams: It's a packed house. Thank you, sir. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack joining us on the program as we're broadcasting here in Louisville, Kentucky at the National Farm Machinery Show. We appreciate him phoning in and being part of our show.

[End of recording.]