

Vilsack lends vision, vitality to USDA



VILSACK

PRESIDENT-ELECT Barack Obama has chosen Tom Vilsack, who served two terms as governor of Iowa, to be the next U.S. ag secretary.

Some 30 years ago, a young lawyer walked into my office in Des Moines and introduced himself. He was with the Bell & Vilsack law firm at Mt. Pleasant in southeast Iowa. He asked several ques-



Guest Editorial
By ROD SWOBODA

tions regarding an article I'd written in *Wallaces Farmer*. The article was about a grain elevator owner who killed himself, leaving a bankrupt business and

many angry farmers behind. Young Vilsack was representing farmers who were owed money for grain.

I was young and uncomfortable as a lawyer I didn't know was questioning me. Vilsack was fair, honest, thorough — all business.

Over the years, I followed his career as his name surfaced in the news. His

is a compelling story. Raised as an orphan in Pittsburgh, Pa., he came to Iowa after graduating from law school in New York. He practiced with his father-in-law in Mt. Pleasant, worked with farmers in the 1980s financial crisis, became mayor of Mt. Pleasant, served two terms in the Iowa Legislature and was elected governor.

The state's first Democrat governor in 40 years, he served from 1999 to 2007.

Shortly after he became Iowa governor, I interviewed Vilsack on another matter. He remembered the day many years before when he came to me for information. The governor recalled details and told me how it took years and years to settle that elevator bankruptcy case.

Many challenges lie ahead

Iowa ag leaders, Republicans as well as Democrats, say Vilsack is a smart, forward-thinking leader. He takes the helm of USDA at a time when a world that's hungry for food and fuel wants better policies shaping American agriculture.

One of the biggest challenges Vilsack will face is dealing with a growing global demand for crops for food and energy and managing the effects of intensive farm production on the environment. No state has been more affected by the growth in biofuel production than Iowa, where livestock producers are paying higher feed prices and the push to grow more corn threatens water quality.

Vilsack must also implement key details of the new farm bill, including new subsidy and disaster aid programs. He'll have to manage disputes over trade and oversee an agency that is supposed to maintain the safety of meat. Congress is due next year to rewrite rules for school lunches and other nutrition programs.

He will do as much as he can to enforce and even tighten eligibility rules for farm subsidies. USDA's budget, now at \$96.5 billion, will be a target as Congress tries to rein in spending. He'll need to work with the administration to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and boost ag research.

USDA needs strong leader

Renewable energy will be at the top of his agenda. Vilsack is an influential advocate for ethanol, biodiesel and wind. Environmentalists will look to him to put a priority on using money in conservation programs to coax landowners to do more to prevent soil erosion. He must learn to deal with issues and commodities he never had in Iowa, including the sugar program, and Southern farmers and lawmakers representing cotton and rice growers.

Critics argue Vilsack is too close to agribusiness and circulated a list of reformers they wanted Obama to appoint. But Vilsack is a better fit, and the department will benefit from his managerial experience as governor. You want someone to lead who has good judgment, is balanced and independent. Tom Vilsack is that person.

Swoboda is editor of *Wallaces Farmer*, a sister publication of *Prairie Farmer*.

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