

Vilsack defends efforts

FORMER Iowa governor and now U.S. Ag Secretary Tom Vilsack showed his grilling skills by flipping pork burgers at the Iowa Pork Producers food stand at the 2009 Iowa State Fair. While there, he was grilled by pork producers asking when the Obama administration will take action to try to boost low hog prices.



Editor's Note

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During an open forum, Vilsack talked about a range of issues. He defended efforts by the administration and Congress to pass climate change legislation. "I believe climate change is real. I know some people disagree," he said. "The rest of the world is looking for leadership from the United States on climate change. If we don't lead, international cooperation

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on other issues, such as trade and terrorism, will be much harder."

Vilsack was responding to a question from Mike Ver Steeg, a hog farmer from Inwood, who cited the difficult financial conditions the pork industry is suffering. Ver Steeg opposes the climate change bill now before Congress. "I have an electricity bill of \$2,400 a month, and I couldn't absorb higher costs," the farmer said. Opponents of climate change legislation say restricting carbon emissions would raise electricity rates in Iowa and other states dependent on coal-fired electricity generation.

Vilsack said a USDA study shows the cap-and-trade provision of the bill would be a "breakeven for agriculture in the short run. But longer term, there would be substantial opportunities for billions of dollars of income for agriculture in trading carbon credits."

He was asked about help for dairy farmers. The price of milk has dropped from 20 cents a pound a year ago to 11 cents this year; hog prices are also down in part because of a collapse in export markets. Vilsack said USDA has sharply increased its purchases of surplus pork and dairy products and is willing to buy even more to give to needy people if Congress provides funds to do so.

USDA is also working to help hog and dairy producers by suspending foreclosures on direct government loans and by trying to persuade bankers to practice forbearance with farmers who have government-guaranteed loans. Hog farmers have lost money for 22 of the past 24 months, and he said USDA is working to get foreign nations to lift bans on beef, chicken and pork imports. One problem is the media's use of the term "swine flu" for the H1N1 virus, he noted.

Vilsack embraced more use of ethanol. "This is a supply issue. We need more vehicles that have flex-fuel capability to use up to 85% ethanol, and more retail stations with blender pumps to allow motorists to obtain the blend they want," he said. "Also, EPA is considering raising the ethanol limit in gasoline to 15% from the current 10%. Our job at USDA is to educate EPA on this issue. I've discussed this often with EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson. EPA now has a better understanding of the issue than they did eight months ago."

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