

REMARKS OF THE HON. ROSA L. DELAURO
AGRICULTURE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING
W/ SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE TOM VILSACK
WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 24TH, 2010
(AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY)

The hearing is called to order.

I want to welcome everyone here to Opening Day of the Fiscal Year 2011 Appropriations process. And particularly, welcome to our friends from USDA who today will be throwing out the first budgetary pitch: Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, as well as Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan, Chief Economist Joseph Glauber, and Scott Steele, who is USDA's budget officer. Thank you all for joining us today. I look forward to hearing your insights.

In addition, I am pleased again to welcome the ranking member, Mr. Kingston, and all of our colleagues on the subcommittee. In this year as in years past, I look forward to collaborating with all of you, and with Secretary Vilsack and his team, in the weeks and months ahead. Last year, our bill was the second bill to get signed into law, and hopefully we can work together to make that happen again.

Secretary Vilsack, let me begin by commending you on the leadership you have shown at the Department of Agriculture over the past year. Your executive experience as a former Governor has clearly helped to begin the transformation of a department that was in dire need of reform upon your arrival.

With last year's appropriations, we made important investments in meeting the core responsibilities of the federal government, including improving our food safety system, expanding opportunities in rural areas, and strengthening child nutrition programs. I hope we can continue these efforts in the year ahead to make sure USDA has the capability and resources it needs to meet its responsibilities to the American people.

With that in mind, to the 2011 budget: First off, I should say that I harbor concerns – particularly given the still-fragile state of our economy – about the dangers of a freeze in discretionary spending falling disproportionately on our most vulnerable Americans right now.

Nonetheless, I am heartened to see that USDA's budget for the coming year includes strong investments in nutrition and supplemental food assistance, including \$351 million more for WIC [a 4.8% increase], and \$5 million more for CSFP [a 3% increase].

There is no question we must act. The American people desperately need our help right now. In this economic downturn, now 25 months long, one in eight Americans – and one in five children – have been receiving food stamp assistance. In America today, almost 14 million children – that's every 1 in 5 -- live below the federal poverty level, and that number is expected to rise to as high as 27% as a result of this recession. If you factor in that the poverty line is

actually much lower than what families need to really get by, it is estimated that 41% of American kids live in a low-income household right now. And, in fact, more than two out of every three children in our public school system – 69%! – currently qualify for free or reduced school lunches. This is a staggering number.

So, I am heartened to see that the department is up to the challenge and is putting forth a good faith effort to augment these crucial programs in the new budget. And I look forward to hearing your thoughts on how we can best address the needs of families for food assistance – and for better nutrition – in the year to come. In addition, I need to learn more about the proposed Healthy Food Financing Initiative, which, as I understand it, will work to combat the problem of food deserts and provide healthier food options in underserved communities. I know these issues are a high priority for the First Lady, and I look forward to working with USDA to make them happen.

Of course, our responsibility on this subcommittee is not only to make sure that families have access to the food they need, but also to ensure that the food in our cupboards and on our kitchen tables is safe. I am very proud of the fact that, since assuming the chair of this subcommittee, we have consistently made stronger investments in our national food safety systems year after year.

And yet, even with additional resources, the crucial job of food safety never gets any easier. We have already seen an unprecedented amount of food recalls in 2010, particularly with regard to contaminated meat, and we are only two months into this new year.

So, with all of this in mind, I am concerned that the proposed budget for FSIS this year only provides less than a 1% increase [\$7.3 million] over last year's bill, aside from funding pay increases. Food safety is a very real matter of national security, and I hope that we are using our resources as wisely as possible to ensure that American families are protected from sickness and harm.

Also of concern to me are the flat funding levels in this budget for the PL 480 Title II program and the McGovern-Dole program. Because of higher food prices, the number of undernourished people in the world has increased by over 150 million over the past two years, and now numbers over a billion. While recognizing that we have problems with hunger here at home, now does not seem a good time to pull back on our commitments to international food aid, not when so many millions around the world are suffering from hunger and malnutrition, and so many more are looking to us as a symbol of hope.

In addition, I have questions about several other important matters under our purview, such as rural development programs, agricultural research and conservation efforts. Some important issues, such as school lunch safety under the AMS, were not touched on in your prepared testimony. And I also think there are other areas, such as the animal identification program, where we can find ways to prevent wasteful spending and make substantive cuts that will save the American people some money. We have put \$147 million into this program to date with almost nothing to show for it, and I am skeptical of the new plans to continue it.

But I do not want to take up too much of the subcommittee's time, and of course I want to give you a chance to offer your testimony today. So let me close by thanking you, Secretary Vilsack, and your team once again for joining us. I look forward to asking you about these and other efforts within the department. As always, we have big goals that we much accomplish together, and it is the crucial details – the budget and the basics we are discussing here today – that get us there. And particularly in this time of continued economic uncertainty, we have a responsibility to the American people to get it right.

With that, I will like to ask Ranking Member Kingston if he would like to make an opening statement. Mr. Kingston, the floor is yours.