

*February 17th, 2012*

"Thank you, Chairman Kingston.

"I look forward to working with you and this committee, and building on last year's bipartisan spirit that allowed us to put together a balanced bill that addressed the core missions of the agencies under our jurisdiction.

"I want to thank Secretary Vilsack, Deputy Secretary Dr. Merrigan, and your staff for being here today.

"I can find no better way to begin our first Appropriations Agriculture Subcommittee hearing, then by honoring the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"This year the USDA turns 150 years old.

"Since 1862, when President Abraham Lincoln signed into law an act of Congress establishing the USDA, this department has been there to support generations of farmers and rural communities—the first at doing both.

"This agency has been the largest contributor to the poor and hungry. And in my opinion will lead the way forward as the provider of nutritional food for a healthier America.

"For a century and a half, the USDA has been there to help rural Americans. It has been there to protect our nation's food supply. And it has been there to offer food assistance to families when they are most in need.

"Today, the mission of the USDA has never been more important.

"Our vast agriculture industry is fueling growth and creating jobs in communities all across our nation.

"It is responding to solutions for alternative energies and leading the world in organic production.

"At the same time, the agriculture industry is just one outbreak away from endangering our food supply and destroying an entire industry.

"Rural areas are still struggling to compete in a 21st century economy.

"As families continue to struggle through the worst economic downturn since the great depression, more than ever, they are looking to programs like WIC and SNAP to help them make ends meet.

"And connecting Americans with healthy meals continues to be a challenge.

"In all of these areas the USDA is working on the frontlines.

"Protecting our food supply. Modernizing rural America. Helping families through the recession. And playing a key role in raising a generation of healthy Americans.

"I hope that as we celebrate the contributions that the USDA has made over the last 150 years, we will also work to ensure the USDA is prepared to meet the challenges of the next 100 years and beyond.

"We all understand that we have a responsibility, and an obligation to get our country's fiscal house in order.

"But we must also remind ourselves, that drastic cuts can be just as dangerous reckless spending.

"There is a right way and a wrong way for us to do this.

"I am encouraged by the progress the USDA has made to consolidate operations that reduce costs, as well modernizing a bureaucracy that is increasing efficiencies and better serving rural areas.

"I am also pleased with the advancements the USDA has made to connect low income communities with fresh fruits and vegetables.

"In the long-term, growing future generations of healthy bodies and healthy minds will reduce medical costs, an area of ever increasing prices.

"But it is clear that there is more that we can do.

"I look forward to this committee working with the USDA towards allocating limited resources that give Americans them the best return on their dollar.

"Secretary Vilsack, I want to commend you for your leadership and your steadfast commitment to serve the American people in the best way the USDA can.

"Thank you for being here, and I look forward to hearing your testimony."

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