



News from NAFA

NAFA Visits with Secretary Vilsack

By Jon Dockter, NAFA Associate Director, and Beth Nelson, NAFA President

In early March, NAFA President Beth Nelson and Past-Chair Mark Wagoner had an opportunity to visit with newly confirmed Secretary Tom Vilsack (Mark and Beth were joined by Jerry Clark with UW-Extension). The discussion focused on farm policy, the farm bill, and other issues of interest to alfalfa and forage producers.

Conservation Stewardship Program and Beneficial Crop Rotations. The new Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) offers the opportunity for supplemental payments to producers who adopt "resource-conserving crop rotations." The farm bill, passed in June 2008, gave the Secretary of Agriculture the authority to designate crops to be considered "resource-conserving." Originally, these "resource-conserving" crops were to have been identified by the end of September 2008. Unforeseen delays and a change of administrations slowed this process. Secretary Vilsack offered some clarity on the topic.

"Supplemental payments for the adoption of resource-conserving crops will be a feature of CSP in 2009. We will provide guidance to our State Conservationists before the end of March so states can begin the process of identifying and determining these rotations. States will have the flexibility to decide whether these rotations are available statewide or tailored for geographic areas within a state." Vilsack added, "During the month of April, State Conservationists will consult with State Technical Committees to establish these rotations so they are ready and available in 2009 CSP contracts. Those rotations then will be publicized in each state so producers have full knowledge of them when CSP signup begins in May 2009."

Alfalfa and Forage Research Program. Also of interest to our industry is the newly authorized Alfalfa and Forage Research Program (AFRP). AFRP is among the high priority research areas included in the 2008 Farm Bill. Vilsack was asked about AFRP's chances for funding considering the fiscal climate in Washington.

"The Farm Bill included a long list of authorized, unfunded, special research topics for which research grants may be made. At the current time, we do not know of any administration proposal to fund this provision. If Congress were to appropriate funds for the new alfalfa provision, it would be administered by CSREES as a competitive grant program. Additionally, there are new ARS initiatives being sought in FY '10 which include biomass and bioenergy production systems, climate change, water management, and improved efficiency. Although these are not specifically targeted to alfalfa, they could broadly include alfalfa to some extent."

Biotechnology. The status of the environmental impact statement with regard to Roundup Ready® alfalfa is on the minds of many producers. As a co-founder of the Governors Biotechnology

Partnership, an effort to increase public understanding and support for the benefits of agricultural biotechnology, Vilsack has strong opinions about biotechnology.

"As Secretary I have opportunities to build upon the work I did as Governor. One very important new opportunity for me personally is to represent the entire United States in talking to other countries about biotechnology. As Governor, I was involved in seeking new foreign markets, and as Secretary I can speak for the entire country and ensure that genetically engineered crops and other products are parts of every discussion about American Agriculture. I will direct our Foreign Agricultural Service to make biotechnology a key part of trade negotiations. I can also work directly with my counterparts in other countries, and in international organizations, to work toward fairer, science-based regulations."



Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack

The Secretary referenced a recent report by the Office of Inspector General about USDA's efforts with respect to biotechnology which found that the Department does not seem to have a strategic vision of how best to promote and to market biotechnology to foreign countries. Nor does there seem to be collaboration and coordination of efforts within the Department. Vilsack offered his views on the report's findings.

"The previous administration was going to try to justify its actions in this area by saying the report was overcritical and 'we think we're doing a great job.' I, on the other hand, think the report is well-founded. We're going to spend the next three or four months developing a strategic framework for how best to promote the concept of biotechnology. I expect we will get pushback

from some folks on the organic and natural foods side, and I'm very supportive of them too. I think they're great. But if you want to grow biotech corn, which 70% of the folks are doing, or if you want to grow biotech soybeans, which 90% of the folks are doing, you should be able to. And Europe should not have barriers which are artificially created. I have no tolerance for that. So our job is to figure out a strategy to expose those folks for what they are and try to convince the folks who are concerned about the science that we've gone through a rather elaborate process. It will not be easy but it's difficult if you don't have a strategy and are not focused."

Secretary Vilsack wants to promote further research into biotechnology in an effort to stimulate the economy as well. "I have always believed that the benefits of biotechnology are significant. This Administration is focused on restoring our economy. I think that biotechnology is one sector that can create new jobs that pay good wages, improve trade balance, and contribute to a better economy. At the same time, it can help feed the world. All in all, biotechnology is incredibly important and I am pleased to have this chance to help this industry grow on behalf of all Americans."