

Release No. 0501.09

Contact:

Office of Communications (202) 720-4623

AGRICULTURE SECRETARY VILSACK LAUNCHES NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF FOOD AND AGRICULTURE, ANNOUNCES VISION FOR SCIENCE AND RESEARCH AT USDA

Agricultural Science Poised to Make Major Contributions to Health, Environmental Challenges

WASHINGTON, October 8, 2009 - Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack today launched the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) with a major speech regarding the role of science and research at USDA. At an event at the National Press Club with John Holdren, Assistant to the President for Science and Technology, Vilsack outlined his vision for addressing the some of the world's major challenges over the coming decades:

Below are excerpts from Vilsack's prepared remarks:

"The opportunity to truly transform a field of science happens at best once a generation. Right now, I am convinced, is USDA's opportunity to work with the Congress, the other science agencies, and with our partners in industry, academia, and the nonprofit sector, to bring about transformative change. We can build on recent scientific discoveries - incredible advances in sequencing plant and animal genomes, for example. We have new and powerful tools -- biotechnology, nanotechnology, and large-scale computer simulations -- applicable to all types of agriculture.

"These discoveries and tools come not a moment too soon. The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization predicts that food production will need to double by 2050 to meet demand, and this has to happen in an environment where our production system already is under threat. For every one degree increase in temperature from global warming, we expect a 10 percent drop in yields. Water is in increasingly short supply in the U.S. and abroad for drinking, for irrigation, and for livestock production. Climate change already is disrupting farming and grazing patterns and food production, and not just overseas -- many sectors of the U.S. agricultural economy are exceptionally vulnerable to climate stress.

"USDA science needs to change to respond to these pressures, to ensure the sustainability of the American food, fuel, and fiber system and to address some of America's - and the world's -- most intractable problems. Ultimately - our success in science has to be matched by impact in society. Already [Under Secretary of Research, Education, and Economics Raj Shah] has begun an in-depth and systematic analysis of our research programs, their goals, and their outcomes to help me better match available resources to critical outcomes for solving national and international problems.

"Formed in the main from the existing Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, NIFA will be the Department's extramural research enterprise. It is no exaggeration to say that NIFA will be a research "start-up" company - we will be rebuilding our competitive grants program from the ground up to generate

real results for the American people. To lead NIFA, President Obama has tapped a preeminent plant scientist from the Danforth Plant Science Center in St. Louis - Roger N. Beachy, winner of the Wolf Prize in Agriculture and a member of the National Academy of Sciences.

"I want USDA science to focus most of its resources on accomplishing a few, bold outcomes with great power to improve human health and protect our environment:

USDA science will support our ability to keep American agriculture competitive while ending world hunger. At a time when disruptive climate change threatens production of some of the world's staple foods, some of the biggest gains we can make in ending world hunger will involve development of stress-resistant crops. USDA science will support our ability to improve nutrition and end child obesity. At USDA we want to take the nutrition and food choice insights we have gained from our science to test out some new approaches to school lunches, breakfast and our other nutrition assistance and education programs.

USDA science will support our efforts to radically improve food safety for all Americans. Each year in the U.S. alone, food-borne pathogens like E. coli kill 5,000 people and sicken 75 million more; the cost to the economy from these infections exceeds \$35 billion.

USDA science will secure America's energy future. President Obama has set ambitious but achievable goals for securing America's energy future from new domestic sources, including 60 billion gallons a year from biofuels by 2030. We plan to focus specifically on rapidly improving the amount and quality of plant-based feedstocks that will be the source of biofuels.

USDA science will make us better stewards of America's environment and natural resources. We believe that research in this priority area will identify agricultural operations in the United States that, within 10 years, will be net carbon sinks.

"President Obama this spring pledged to invest more heavily in the nation's basic sciences, and to commit as much as 3 percent of America's GDP to science. Agricultural science needs to be part of that strategic investment strategy. Focus, scale, and impact - these are the levers Raj, Roger, and I will use to launch a new paradigm for the science that underpins our food, agriculture, and natural resources systems research.

"I am asking today for a commitment of will and energy to bring about our generation's new era of agricultural science. I look forward to charting a course together to accelerate the pace of scientific discovery in the agricultural sciences, speed the application of new knowledge to address challenges facing US and global food and agriculture, and translate new knowledge into tangible benefits for the American people and the world."

#

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer and lender. To file a complaint of discrimination, write: USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call (800) 795-3272(voice), or (202) 720-6382 (TDD).

#

USDA News

oc.news@usda.gov

202 720-4623