

USDA Policy Guidance from Remarks by Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack

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AGRICULTURE SECRETARY VILSACK PRESENTS NATIONAL VISION FOR AMERICA'S FORESTS

[Audio](#)

SEATTLE, August 14, 2009 – Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack today outlined his vision for the future of our nation's forests. In his first major address regarding the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, Vilsack set forth a new direction guided by the principles of conservation, management, and restoration of these natural treasures.

Below are excerpts from Secretary Vilsack's speech as prepared for delivery:

"A healthy and prosperous America relies on the health of our natural resources, and particularly our forests. America's forests supply communities with clean and abundant water, shelter wildlife, and help us mitigate and adapt to climate change. Forests help generate rural wealth through recreation and tourism, through the creation of green jobs, and through the production of wood products and energy. And they are a national treasure – requiring all of us to protect and preserve them for future generations.

"The President has made clear his interest in conserving our natural environment. I intend to take that responsibility very seriously and to devote the time and attention it deserves. I also know that Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell shares that commitment.

"The Forest Service must not be viewed as an agency concerned only with the fate of our National Forests, but must instead be acknowledged for its work in protecting and maintaining all American forests, including state and private lands. Our shared vision adopts an 'all-lands approach,' requiring close collaboration with the NRCS and its work on America's private working lands.

"Our shared vision begins with restoration. Restoration means managing forest lands first and foremost to protect our water resources, while making our forests more resilient to climate change. Forest restoration led by the dedicated people at the Forest Service opens non-traditional markets for climate mitigation and biomass energy while appropriately recognizing the need for more traditional uses of forest resources.

"Emerging markets for carbon and sustainable bioenergy will provide landowners with expanded economic incentives to maintain and restore forests. The Forest Service must play a significant role in the development of new markets and ensuring their integrity. Carbon and bioenergy aren't the only new opportunity for landowners. Markets for water can also provide landowners with incentives to restore watersheds and manage forests for clean and abundant water supplies. These markets can also create jobs in rural.

"Why restoration as a driving principle in forest policy? There is no doubt that we are facing a health crisis in our forests. Climate change places them under increasing stress that exacerbates the threats of fire, disease, and insects. Throughout the West – but in other parts of the country

as well – a legacy of fire suppression has resulted in forests that are over-stocked and much more susceptible to catastrophic fire and disease. Restoring forest ecosystems, particularly in fire-adapted forests, will make forests more resilient to climate-induced stresses and will ensure that our forests continue to supply abundant, clean water.

"The threats facing our forests don't recognize property boundaries. So, in developing a shared vision around forests, we must also be willing to look across property boundaries. In other words, we must operate at a landscape-scale by taking an 'all-lands approach.'"

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Brookings Institute Conference
"Regional Innovation Clusters: Advancing the Next Economy"

Closing Keynote Remarks by The Honorable Tom Vilsack

Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture;

SECRETARY VILSACK: How do we make the case to bright, young people that there is economic opportunity in rural America? We at USDA take this challenge very, very seriously. In fact, if you took a look at all of farm families and you asked the question how much of your income comes from farming, you might be surprised to know that only 9 percent of all farm families' income comes from farming. That puts a high premium on the need for us to have economic development and job growth in rural communities, so we can make the case to that son or daughter that there is a future in their small town.

I think this administration has aggressively attacked this challenge. We first of all decided that there needed to be a series of different strategies, different new opportunities that we would focus and showcase in a way of suggesting that the rural economy is capable of revitalization, and one of the first things we did was to take a look at the enormous impact that broadband can have on expanding opportunity.

Another strategy is the enormous opportunity that energy presents, from biofuel production to renewable energy production. Just take biofuel production, for example. The Congress has challenged us to produce 36 billion gallons of biofuel by the year 2022. When we meet that challenge, \$95 billion will be invested in rural communities across the country in biorefineries, and somewhere between 8- and 900,000 jobs will be created. It will certainly improve the bottom line for farmers because we will move away from a biofuels industry that is focused in

one region of the country, the Midwest, and allow it to expand and grow in all four corners of the country. That's an enormous opportunity.

We even see as part of our strategy a more effective use of our conservation resources. Few people realize the enormous opportunity that outdoor recreation represents. It is roughly a \$700-billion industry. Those who fish, those who hunt, those who hike, those who bike, those who four wheel spend a tremendous amount of resource. To the extent that we can better link economic opportunity with our conservation dollars, improve the utilization of our natural resources, we will grow that industry even further.

In our mission area of USDA, we have responsibility for 193 million acres of forest and grasslands area called the U.S. Forest Service. Each year, 173 million people travel to those forests. Each year, at least 300 million people travel around those forests, a tremendous tourism opportunity that we need to take more and better advantage of.

And, finally, the creation and development of ecosystem markets is an opportunity for new resources and capital to be invested in rural communities. I'll give you an example of what an ecosystem market is. If you are a small town in Southern Ohio and you're confronted with a circumstance of having to build a new wastewater treatment facility because your department of natural resources is suggesting that there are problems of the water quality that you're utilizing, you have now two choices. You have the choice to build the facility, or you have the choice to establish water credits that you can essentially sell to farmers that they can use to institute conservation practices that prevent soils containing pesticides and chemicals from getting into rivers and streams, thereby reducing the necessity for the upgrades that the department of natural resources is requiring. As we create these opportunities of ecosystem markets, we create resources that otherwise might go into high-priced infrastructure that can be used to create wealth opportunities in farm country.

All five of those strategies are currently at work within USDA and are being worked on and expanded.