

# Michele Bachmann Literally Praised Government Pork In Letter To Obama Official



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WASHINGTON -- Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-Minn.) has built a large part of her conservative appeal on strict opposition to federal intervention in the free market. Her real-time criticism of the Troubled Asset Relief Program earned her plaudits among the base voters who will soon decide Republican primary elections. Her pledge to repeal President Obama's health care law, on grounds that it imposes an across-the-board government solution, has become a focal point of her presidential campaign.

When it comes to the agriculture industry, however, Bachmann's record doesn't match the fiscal conservative hype. A Freedom of Information Act request for communications the Minnesota Republican has had with the Department of Agriculture shows that she leaned heavily on federal officials for help -- never more so than when it came to aiding the pork and dairy producers in her state.

On Oct. 5, 2009, Bachmann wrote Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack praising him for injecting money into the pork industry through the form of direct government purchases. She went on to request additional assistance.

"Your efforts to stabilize prices through direct government purchasing of pork and dairy products are very much welcomed by the producers in Minnesota, and I would encourage you to take any additional steps necessary to prevent further deterioration of these critical

industries, such as making additional commodity purchases and working to expand trade outlets for these and other agricultural goods," Bachmann wrote.

At the time, the pork industry was facing a two-pronged calamity: fallout from the H1N1 influenza crisis and the ripple effects of the recession. Pork producers had lost nearly \$4.6 billion in equity since 2007 and Vilsack, sensing greater market doom, had injected funds into the industry at least four times since that spring. In March 2009, the USDA purchased \$25 million in pork, in April it made a \$50 million purchase and in July it bought 775,000 pounds of ham, according to reports. In September, just one month before receiving Bachmann's letter, Vilsack had signed off on \$30 million in additional federal purchases of pork.

Seeking to balance the narrow political interests of her district (which is affected by the ups and downs of the pork market) with her broader message of reining in government spending, Bachmann urged Vilsack to ensure that "any federal funds expended are used wisely to provide timely assistance to struggling producers." Clearly, however, she welcomed the crutch of federal funds, pleading that producers had not experience a situation as dire "in decades."

Bachmann's congressional office did not return requests for comment for this article. Backers of federal purchasing of pork did, however, defend the practice on its merits.

"This isn't a subsidy," said Dave Warner, Director of Communications at the National Pork Producers Council. "This is the federal government getting the food they need for food assistance programs and getting it at a good price."

As Warner notes, the government helps feed significant swaths of the U.S. population, from low-income students to the elderly, military personnel and prisoners. When Vilsack purchased more pork, it came from within pre-existing Department of Agriculture budget allocations. It also saved jobs.

"I don't know if it stabilized things, but it helped," said Warner. "Obviously it helped."

But it wasn't the conservative way of doing things. Indeed, even before Bachmann wrote her letter, Fox News' Sean Hannity had penned a blog post [blasting the government](#) for "literally" buying pork. Among the list of items he found objectionable: "\$16.7 million to Minnesota for 'canned pork'" -- money that came from Vilsack's purchase of 775,000 pounds of ham.

While Hannity's critique was centered on the budget lines of the president's stimulus package, farm subsidies at large have increasingly received ridicule for the budget-slashing crowd. The specific pork purchases Bachmann referenced aren't technically a subsidy. They do, however, represent the type of federal involvement in private industry that leaves both think-tankers and activists bothered.

"This action favored some producers and took funding away from others," said Chris Edwards, editor of the Cato Institute's [Downsizing Government](#) website. "If pork and dairy producers were affected by that particular outbreak [H1N1], that is why they have insurance. Federal government has massive farm insurance programs. They can also save. Farmers can save up for years with poor weather conditions or other problems like disease on the horizon ... I think this is just a way to provide subsidies for a private special interest without a budget."

If the Vilsack letter were a solitary incident, Bachmann would likely be excused for conducting simple, provincial politics. Three of the six counties in her district [are among](#) the top ten recipients of dairy subsidies in the state. Federal help is influential in maintaining the good will of her constituents.

But as she prepares to barnstorm through early primary states, in what is increasingly being treated as a serious candidacy for the White House, her record on government spending is undergoing enhanced scrutiny. Bachmann herself has a family farm -- managed most recently by her now deceased father-in-law -- [that received](#) \$251,000 in farm payments between 1995 and 2006.

The congresswoman has been careful to [hit the right notes](#) with respect to ethanol subsidies, which help her home state but have become a crowning example of government spending that could be dropped. But with respect to other federal expenditures, including earmarks, her record has raised doubts. She infamously argued that transportation projects should not be subjected to Congress' earmark ban.

"Advocating for transportation projects for ones district in my mind does not equate to an earmark," [she said](#).

Bachmann appropriated more than \$3.7 million worth of earmarks while in Congress before the ban was passed. Even earlier, as a state senator, she proposed more than \$60 million in earmarks for her state and district.

Bachmann's office responded to reports of her past earmark requests by drawing a distinction between proposing earmarks for one's own state or district and supporting pork-barrel projects that lack such a direct benefit. But, as [Matt Lewis of the Daily Caller wrote](#), "Tea Party activists may find the argument that earmarks are fine at the state level as appealing as Mitt Romney's argument that individual health care mandates are fine so long as they are enacted at the state level."

*Alex Becker contributed reporting.*