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Tom Vilsack for USDA? Expect more inaction on hunger, discrimination, pollution and rural decline

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There have long been structural tensions inherent to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's roles and responsibilities, and the choice of former Iowa governor Tom Vilsack as secretary sends a strong signal to Congress, stakeholders and the public on how the department will navigate those tensions.

Though 76% of the farm bill budget goes to nutrition, which relates to the demand and consumption of food, department secretaries historically focus on supply issues — namely, livestock and crops, many of which aren't even food.

Historical racism and discrimination in U.S. agriculture directed against Black and Native American farmers, enabled and perpetuated by USDA policies, is another source of tension. This has resulted in white farmers owning 98% and operating 94% of U.S. farmland.

A third set of issues relates to USDA response to the pervasive environmental consequences resulting from modern agricultural production. These are now viewed as incidental to crop and livestock production, to be solved by voluntary payments, which not coincidentally, can be a form of extra income for farmers. Compliance with weak environmental regulations is poorly enforced.

Finally, USDA has been a passive player, at best, in the dramatic consolidation of the livestock and meatpacking sectors. The resulting oligopolies have reduced prices and marketing avenues for farmers and created incentives for unsustainable practices.

Some Iowans believe the benefits of these USDA policies outweigh the costs. This assessment is based on the false premise, however, that true alternatives to the current production model are impractical and that we can at best hope for incremental changes. Industry groups (such as the one Vilsack works for, the Dairy Export Council) and landowners have conveniently framed the recent history of the agricultural sector as driven by sound, effective policies while ignoring the state of our water and climate, working conditions in the food industry, the shrinking number of ever larger, less diverse farms and the struggles of both rural and urban Iowans.

One need only compare the rural Iowa of 1970 with that of 2020 to see that modern agriculture has been an economic failure for the vast majority of Iowa's communities. The industry vision also ignores how much the system depends on public funding: According to USDA, 39% of net

farm income in 2019 was due to federal subsidies, and, as Scott Lincicome at the Cato Institute notes, these regressive subsidies disproportionately benefit larger farms, leading to further consolidation and the demise of small town Iowa.

It's reasonable to argue taxpayer investment in agriculture should focus less on farmer income and more on clean air and water, fair working conditions, and competitive markets. Does a long-term architect of the current production system and its associated problems have the desire and vision to make such course changes? It seems unlikely.

The Biden-Harris transition team is touting its “Build Back Better” approach for the incoming administration, and they appear serious about climate change. The Vilsack nomination, however, screams “Build More of the Same.” Farmers will profit from the voluntary participation in carbon markets, receive subsidies for carbon farming and regenerative agriculture, and operate under the same lax enforcement and lack of accountability we have seen for decades, while continuing to rely heavily on fossil fuels and corn ethanol — hardly an effective climate change mitigation strategy, despite what you might hear from industry advocates.

And as we taxpayers help Build More of the Same, Iowans will continue suffering from more frequent and extreme floods and other climate-induced disasters.

The choice of Vilsack clearly signals we can expect no substantively new policies from the incoming administration at USDA, while agriculture desperately needs to shift its focus toward consumers, industry workers across the supply chain, the environment and environmental justice, and antitrust and regulation to address its structural challenges.