

FEATURE – VILSACK APPEARS BEFORE SENATE AGRICULTURE COMMITTEE

INTRO: President-Elect Barack Obama's nominee for Agriculture Secretary told the U-S Senate's Agriculture Committee that he would address civil rights issues, defend farming and ranching and work to alleviate hunger. The U-S-D-A's Bob Ellison has more. (1:37)

FORMER IOWA GOVERNOR TOM VILSACK FACED A MOSTLY FRIENDLY U-S SENATE AGRICULTURE COMMITTEE IN HIS CONFIRMATION HEARING TO BECOME AGRICULTURE SECRETARY. HOWEVER, COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN TOM HARKIN RAISED A SERIOUS ISSUE EARLY IN THE PROCEEDINGS.

Sen. Tom Harkin, Iowa-D: Among the most intractable challenges facing the new secretary of agriculture is the intolerable and inexcusable state of civil rights in USDA's agricultural programs and for USDA employees.

Former Gov. Tom Vilsack, Iowa-D: Discrimination in any form will not be tolerated in this department.

MEANWHILE, OTHER SENATORS TOLD VILSACK PART OF HIS DUTIES WILL BE TO DEFEND AGRICULTURE AND TEACH THE PUBLIC ABOUT FARMING'S IMPORTANCE.

Sen. Pat Roberts, Kansas-R: There's a lot of criticism of agriculture recently, much of it coming from folks who either don't understand or appreciate what I call production agriculture. And I hope that we don't ignore the person who produces the food and fiber for this country and I hope you are a champion in that regard.

Vilsack: I do appreciate the diversity of agriculture and that it's the job of the USDA to be responsive and representative of all of that diversity and to be supportive of that diversity.

OTHER SENATORS ADDRESSED THE IMPORTANCE OF DOMESTIC FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS DURING DIFFICULT ECONOMIC TIMES. VILSACK SAID THERE'S NO EXCUSE FOR HUNGER IN THE U-S.

Vilsack: This is a powerful, rich country and none of us should be satisfied that there are children going to bed hungry.

VILSACK IS EXPECTED TO BE CONFIRMED BY THE FULL SENATE LATER THIS MONTH. IN WASHINGTON, FOR THE U-S DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, I'M BOB ELLISON.