

## PolicyPennings by Daryll E. Ray &amp; Harwood D. Schaffer

## Vilsack says Rural America needs a new mindset

US Secretary of Agriculture garnered a lot of media attention on December 6 when he asked the attendees at the 2012 Farm Journal Forum, “Why is it that we don’t have a Farm Bill?”

He went on to say, “It isn’t just the differences of policy. It’s the fact that the Rural America with a shrinking population is becoming less and less relevant to the politics of this country, and we had better recognize that, and we better begin to reverse it.” From the tone of his statement one might expect that he was going to go into a discussion of how city folks have written off the future of rural areas.

Instead the point of his comment was that it is rural residents who have written off the future of rural areas by adopting a preservation mindset instead of a growth mindset. As he says, we need “a new mindset in Rural America.” We need to ask ourselves “Where are the new opportunities?”

And in his speech, Vilsack identifies a set of priorities and opportunities that are a part of the growth mindset he is talking about.

He told his audience that in response to climate change, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) needs to “focus on additional research and ways in which we can adapt and mitigate and develop strategies that in the long term will allow us to continue to have the greatest agriculture in the world.” As part of that, Vilsack talked about increased double-cropping.

In turning to what he dubbed a new rural development approach, Vilsack spoke of “expanding broadband access to ensure that those who set up a business, who establish an opportunity in rural areas, have the capacity and the power to be able to reach not just a local market, not just a regional market, but a global market.”

Another part of this new rural development approach is convincing “smaller communities...that they have to look at themselves as a part of an overall region... addressing economic development opportunities from a regional perspective as opposed to a community-by-community perspective.”

In addition, “We need to continue to promote local and regional food systems.... a multi-billion-dollar opportunity which is continuing to grow and provides opportunities for very small producers [and] which will help repopulate some of these rural communities,”

Vilsack said.

Vilsack also tied rural development to the “need to invest significantly in conservation and link it more closely to outdoor recreation and bring those tourism opportunities back into the rural areas. If people are spending hundreds of billions of dollars,” he said. “we need to capture those resources, and we need to turn them around in the economy more frequently.”

In discussing a biobased economy, Vilsack took a line from the old saw that in slaughtering a hog, butchers used everything but the squeal when he said, “we need to absolutely seize the opportunity that the biobased economy creates, the ability to literally take everything we grow, every aspect of every crop, every waste product that’s produced and turn it into an asset, into a commodity, into an ingredient.”

He then provided examples of this as he told of turning plant materials into lighter weight car bodies, hog manure into asphalt, and molecules from corncobs into plastic bottles. “This is an amazing new future where virtually everything we need in an economy can be biology-based, plant-based, crop-based, and livestock-based; enormous new opportunities to build refineries that are not large, as we see in the oil industry, but are small because of [the] bulk of [this] biomass is basically dotting the landscape, creating economic opportunity, creating new markets, as well as job opportunities.”

Vilsack challenged his audience saying, “we need to cement that new economy in Rural America, and we need to sell it to our young people if we’re going to reverse the population and poverty challenges that Rural America faces. And frankly, I think we need to recognize that unless we respond and react, the capacity of Rural America and its power and its reach will continue to decline.”

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