

Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Request for the Department of Agriculture, Agriculture, Rural Development,
Food and Drug Administration Subcommittees

21 March 2024

Intro: Department of Agriculture Secretary Thomas Vilsack discussed USDA's priorities with the House Appropriations Subcommittee members.

Congressional Witnesses:

- The Honorable Thomas Vilsack, Secretary, U.S Department of Agriculture

Highlights:

- Secretary Vilsack is pressed on the administration's CCC uses in the context of Farm Bill discussions and relief requests for California dairy producers.
- Committee Chair Dr. Andy Harris (R-MD) cited ITO management of WIC and summer feeding programs as precedent for limits on SNAP program foods in a discussion with the Secretary.
- Secretary Vilsack said the comparison to state and ITO-managed programs is not the same, and that there are complicated aspects to the programs.

General notes:

Representative (R-MD) Dr. Andy Harris led chaired the meeting.

In the context of the Farm Bill, the Secretary was questioned by Committee majority members over the Commodity Credit Corporation, specifically concerning its use by the Biden Administration to supplement farm bill funding as well as declining to CCC funds for disaster relief payments to some California dairy producers.

Representative Lauren Underwood (D-IL) mentioned that USDA's Office of Tribal Relations fell short of its requested funding, possibly hampering its ability to carry out its work. She asked Secretary Vilsack how it planned to sustain its demanding workload given those constraints and how those may impact Tribal communities the Department serves.

- Secretary Vilsack: "We'll do our level best to make sure that we continue to focus on food sovereignty, continue to focus on economic opportunity with tribes but the reality is if you limit the resources, you're going to ultimately limit the capacity of that office to do all the work that it's interested in doing and that people in tribes are interested in having done."

Chair Dr. Andy Harris (R-MD) cited Tribal operations on WIC and summer EBT programs, specifically noting they purchase WIC-approved foods that "are generally much more nutritious foods than ... foods available under SNAP." He asked the secretary if similar programmatic management at the state level may be useful for school feeding programs.

- The Secretary said the comparison was not as simple as Congressman Harris made it, citing Tribal participants in such programs constitute a smaller number than state-level programs

have. Vilsack said USDA had the authority to allow states to test restrictions on SNAP purchasing but that such projects would have to be accompanied by a significant evaluation process.

- He made a comparison of his own, asking rhetorically if it was fair to restrict SNAP food choices, when USDA doesn't limit what farmers can do with the money they receive from USDA, saying "There's a fairness and consistency issue," Vilsack said. "If indeed the goal here is for taxpayer dollars to be directly linked to more nutritious decisions, are you going to make that same decision for farm emergency relief?" Vilsack asked.