

Senate Appropriations- FY25 Agriculture Dept. Budget Request

16 April 2024

Witness: US Department of Agriculture [Secretary Tom Vilsack](#)

Highlights:

- Secretary Vilsack stated that the USDA is in the process of defining what a Native American establishment institution is and is engaged in consultations with Tribes to discuss self-determination as it relates to bison processing. He verbally committed to working closely with Senators to determine what is needed for USDA to expand Tribal self-determination opportunities, including through 638 contracting authorities.
- The committee inquired about many topics, ranging from Tribal self-determination, WIC usage, farm losses, the importance of passing a farm bill, broadband access, and Commodity Credit Corporations.

General Notes:

- Vilsack's opening statement focused on the importance of investing in the rural partnership network, housing, looking at congressionally directed spending, and the community facility program for areas of persistent poverty to continue the momentum that has occurred.
- He endorsed the Fiscal Year 2025 budget for its provisions for climate-smart agriculture practices, as well as additional tools at FSA to aid farmers who might be struggling by increasing the microloan limit, increasing the ownership loan limits, and providing debt relief.
- [Sen. Martin Heinrich \(D-N.M.\)](#) asked for an update on the implementation of the two bison production-related provisions that were in the FY 24 bill related to inspection fees for processing and then also production and marketing.
 - Secretary Vilsack answered that the bill recently passed and that the USDA is in the process of defining what a Native American establishment institution is. This is so that the agency will know where the resources and assistance need to be directed. He said the USDA is consulting with Tribes this week and next week to discuss self-determination regarding processing.
 - He continued by saying that the USDA is investing resources under the American Rescue Plan (ARP) and expanding processing capacity. He stated that he anticipates working collaboratively with Tribes in a way that will dovetail and parallel what the agency will do with states where they attempt to pick up roughly half of the costs. He expects to see discussions with Tribe to reach a consensus on an arrangement.
- [Sen. John Hoeven \(R-ND\)](#) asked Secretary Vilsack what the most effective way would be to stop the loss of farms.
 - Sec. Vilsack answered that it is a combination of safety nets and markets. He further stated the USDA must continue to look for ways to expand crop insurance coverage.
- [Sen. Jerry Moran \(R-KS\)](#) highlighted the importance of the farm bill and asked the Senate leadership of the agriculture committee to reemphasize and refocus on getting a farm bill done.

- [Sen. Deb Fischer \(R-NE\)](#) asked about maximizing broadband programs, stating that she believes it would be most effective to have one data source to rely on about where broadband is and where it is not. She asked Sec. Vilsack to share how the USDA tried to promote a more consistent challenge process by comparing what is used by Rural Utility Service versus what is used by the FCC in connection with the National Broadband Map, and has the USDA considered measures to improve transparency for challenges by publishing written recent decisions on those challenges.
 - Sec. Vilsack answered that under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the White House convened the FCC, the Department of Commerce, and the USDA to express concern over their collaboration. Ultimately, Sec. Vilsack answered that it has been a group effort to work with the organizations and the states to make the necessary changes to provide decent broadband access everywhere in the country.
- Sen. Jerry Moran (R-KS) inquired about the WIC program and asked if the availability of dairy has been reduced.
 - Sec. Vilsack answered that there has not been a reduction to dairy products available, but a reduced commitment to fluid milk to 78% as to be consistent with the supplemental nature of WIC. He added that they have in turn made the packaging for other dairy products like yogurt easier and more accessible.
 - Sec. Vilsack stated that they are seeing an increased number of participants in the WIC program and that the USDA expects that roughly 130 million more quarts of milk will be sold in the program than in previous years.
- Sen. Jerry Moran (R-KS) voiced his concerns about a recent announcement from the National Agriculture Statistics Survey (NASS) that it would be canceling the July cattle report and discontinuing the cotton objective yield survey and asked if there is more information that the USDA can make available so that the information is there.
 - Sec. Vilsack responded that this is due to the reduction of the NASS budget.
- Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-NM) asked Sec. Vilsack to commit to working closely with him and other senators to determine what is needed for USDA to expand Tribal self-determination opportunities, including through 638 contracting authorities.
 - Sec. Vilsack said, “We are more than happy to work with you and more importantly, or as importantly, with the Tribes. I mentioned the consultations that are going to take place. They are in nutrition, forestry, and food safety to try to figure out how to structure the self-determination that fits the mission of USDA. We’re a little different than the Department of Interior because many of the programs that the Interior Department has are expressly in and confined to Tribal areas, and in Tribal nations, and our programs bleed over into nontribal areas. So, we need to make sure that we are aligning it appropriately. But we are very committed to this, as I think expressed by the fact that we have over 160 stewardship arrangements in the Forest Service. That’s a good example, and the work we’ve done in the Food Distribution Program is another.”
 - Sen. Heinrich stated that another successful example of 638 contracting is Pueblo Santa Clara’s 638 contract with the USDA.

- Sen. John Hoeven (R-ND) spoke on the importance of CCCs (Commodity Credit Corporations) and asked Sec. Vilsack about where the USDA is in terms of getting some of the current programs dispersed that have utilized CCCs.
 - Sec. Vilsack answered that there is an opportunity for the USDA to do significantly more projects, but they must go through an environmental review. There are roadblocks and red tape in the way of many of these programs that make it difficult to enact the programs.