

PolicyPennings by Daryll E. Ray & Harwood D. Schaffer

Vilsack to Ag: Choose your battles carefully; your credibility is at stake

In early December 2012, US Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack addressed the 2012 Farm Journal Forum touching on a wide range of topics from international agricultural trade, to the farm bill, to renewable fuels, to the need for increased investment in rural infrastructure. And all of these topics and others he mentioned are important, but, in our minds, one set of comments stood out above the rest.

When talking about the delay in getting a farm bill passed, Vilsack said, “We have to be strategic about the fights that we pick, because the fights we often pick are misinterpreted in some corners.”

As examples of picking the wrong fights and losing credibility, Vilsack told his audience, “now, I can’t tell you how frustrating it’s been to hear the conversation that we’ve had for the last couple of years about regulations, regulations that either didn’t exist, weren’t going to exist, or that were taken care of. I read a survey recently where people were still talking about the dust rule. Not going to happen, never going to happen. People are still concerned about the child labor issue. Not going to happen, never going to happen. We dealt with this, but yet we continue to talk about it.”

In his speech Vilsack gives an example of what he considers a strategic fight: “the egg producers decide they want to sit down and [talk] to the enemy, the Humane Society [because] they’re tired of having to fight referendum after referendum. They don’t want 50 sets of rules. They want one set of rule. They want one rule, and they want to make peace.”

But then “they get castigated by [other] folks in agriculture [saying], ‘You’re going to destroy the system.’ Actually not. We’re going to grow it, because we’re not going to be fighting 50 different battles every 2 years. We are going to grow our industry. We’re going to be proactive. We’re going to fight a good fight, a strategic fight, one that’s worth fighting.”

In talking about the drought, Vilsack gives another example of a wrong fight. “Whether it’s the intense storms that the eastern coast has sustained the last couple of years, the sustained drought that we have seen in the Great Plains area, and the extraordinary wildfires that we have experienced in the western part of the United States, there is no question [that] while there may be a debate in some folks’ mind about the cause, there is no question that the climate is indeed

changing.”

Vilsack outlines the fight he would rather have. We need to make sure that the “USDA and all in agriculture and those concerned about Rural America [are able] to focus on additional research [to identify] 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 a result, he says, the USDA is “going to continue to make a concerted effort, as we have the last several years, in developing the kind of research that will allow us to respond, to understand climate change, to understand its impact long term over the course of decades as opposed to years, and be able to provide agriculture across the United States with the information that producers will need to be more adaptive to mitigate the consequences and to be more efficient in the use of their land.”

After he finished his talk, the moderator opened the floor up for questions. The first question was, “Mr. Secretary, could you say a word about SNAP’s outlook, its philosophy, its demographics?”

Vilsack responded, “Now, there’s a good example of a battle that we’re having that is not strategic, in my view. The SNAP program, who gets it? Ninety-two percent of the people receiving SNAP are one of four people. They’re either a senior citizen who played by the rules and [is] just living on a very, very small fixed income; they’re a person with a disability; they’re a child; or they’re someone who is in the workforce working, but because of the number of hours they work or the wages they get paid, they just can’t make ends meet by the end of the month. They are people [who] are playing by the rules that we care about, but we stigmatize those folks.”

Politicians usually tell audiences what they want to hear. It is refreshing when one tells them what he thinks they need to hear.

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