



FOOD & SOCIETY POLICY FELLOWS

Vilsack and Daschle Must Work Together in the New Year-Make Soil to Health Resolutions

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*(Angie Tagtow is one of the best voices around on food & health! I'm so glad she posted this here!!!
- promoted by Jill Richardson)*

As Tom Vilsack and Tom Daschle assume their cabinet positions in the Obama administration as Secretaries of Agriculture and Health and Human Services, respectively, they inherit mammoth challenges. Working together will be key to their success, because their work has a common denominator - food.

The connection is simple - the health of America's eaters depends on the health of the food and agriculture system.

Diet-related diseases continue to escalate - specifically in our children. Researchers predict that as a result of the continued rise in overweight, the children of today will have a shorter lifespan than their parents. Overweight and obesity alone have translated into skyrocketing health care costs which are bankrupting families and the health care system.

Likewise, the number of family farms and acres used for growing food is falling, while the cost of farm inputs are increasing. Subsidized crops such as corn, soybeans and wheat have flooded supermarkets with more processed, packaged "food-like" substances. Often, these foods are of low nutritional value and high in sugar, fat and salt.

A dichotomy exists between agriculture policies and Dietary Guidelines for Americans - yet, ironically, both are overseen by the USDA. Current food and farm policies stand in the way of making healthy food the easiest choice.

Food and agriculture policies must support disease prevention efforts and can save millions in health care costs. The USDA and USDHHS must use sound science, instead of pressures from special interests like biotechnology companies and the food industry, to reform policies and programs that support a healthy and sustainable food and agriculture system.

As Vilsack and Daschle assume their cabinet positions in January, they should adopt the words of author and farmer Wendell Berry who said "eating is an agricultural act," and agree to the following resolutions that build healthy land, eaters, farms and the economy.



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Work Together. It sounds easy but USDA and USDHHS do not have a strong working relationship on initiatives that focus on healthy individuals, families, farms and communities. To build this relationship and refocus attention on food that supports health, an intradepartmental Food Policy Council, led by a Food Czar, should be established to assure farm, food and nutrition policies and programs support public health goals. In addition to working with other Federal agencies like the FDA, EPA and the Interior Department, this would eliminate counteraction of programs and policies while increasing program integrity, efficiency and accountability.

Build Fertile Soil - Healthy soil grows healthy food. Soil is a critical component of the earth's life support system, and how soil is managed determines our ability to grow food for future generations. In June 2008, Iowa experienced unprecedented flooding that destroyed land, homes, businesses and communities. According to the Iowa Daily Erosion Project, 60% of Iowa's counties lost seven tons of soil per acre that month. Soil loss reduces our ability to grow food. Simply, without soil there would be no farms, and without farms there would be no food. And without food, our health and communities deteriorate. To retain this natural resource, agriculture and land management policies must focus on protecting, preserving and rebuilding fertile soil. Farmers should receive support or credits for decreasing use of synthetic farm chemicals, protecting natural resources, building soil, reducing fossil fuel use and capturing carbon.

Grow More Fruits and Vegetables. Healthy people need healthy food. A diet rich in fruits and vegetables maximizes health. According to the USDA, if each of us ate the recommended servings of foods according to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, U.S. farms would need to produce an additional 7.6 million acres in fruit and 6.5 million additional acres in vegetables. Our agriculture system does not grow enough of the right foods that promote our health. We are forced to rely on other countries to put fruits and vegetables on our plates. As we grow fewer types of food, the variety of foods we eat decreases. This leads to lower nutritional quality of our diets, increases our risk of diet-related disease and compromises our domestic nutrition security. To boost fruit and vegetable production, we need to revitalize farm policies that support diversified small and mid-sized farms and local processors, thereby decreasing our reliance on other countries to support healthy diets.

Make Healthy Food the Easiest Choice. As we increase our consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables and whole grains, we lower our risk of developing obesity, diabetes, heart disease and some cancers. Less disease means lower health care costs. Yet, healthy foods are not always the easiest choice and the cost of nutritious food or the distance one has to travel to purchase healthy food often is the deal-breaker for low-income families. The same applies to federal food and nutrition assistance programs. When food costs rise, fewer people are served or services are cut. In 2009, Congress will reauthorize the Child Nutrition and WIC Act. Administered by USDA, programs such as WIC and the National School Lunch Program offer tremendous health benefits to children. For example, USDA and USDHHS could work together to lift the severe cost constraints that limit the purchase of healthy, fresh foods within these programs. Improving the nutritional quality of the WIC food package and the foods served in schools will nourish healthy children, prepare them to learn, reduce childhood diseases, reduce food insecurity and



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produce healthy, productive adults. The nutritional health of our children is the foundation for community and economic development.

Leverage Food Production as Community Economic Development. On average, fresh produce travels about 1500 miles before it appears on plates in the Midwest. Approximately 90% of the food consumed in Iowa is not grown in Iowa. As supply channels lengthen, our food becomes more vulnerable. Growing more food closer to where we eat it increases our access to fresh seasonal food, cultivates a closer relationship with farmers, and builds community resiliency, economic stability, food security and health. Buying food directly from farmers generates revenue that is reinvested within communities and strengthens local economies. According to the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, if Iowans ate five servings of fruits and vegetables per day, and Iowa farmers supplied that produce for three months of the year, these additional crops would add \$300 million and more than 4,000 jobs to the Iowa economy. Agriculture and health policies working together to leverage food production as a community asset will strengthen economic development while increasing access to fresh, seasonal and delicious food.