

# TOM VILSACK, BRIDGE BUILDER

BY JACQUI FATKA

## *The long-serving ag secretary seeks ways for diverse farm interests to find common ground*

AS A CHILD, Tom Vilsack didn't have much of a social life. He was reluctant to invite friends over, because his mother might be drinking, popping pills or turning violent.

Since it wasn't easy to establish relationships, young Tom got some sound advice from his father: "If you want people to like you and respect you when you're in a group, make them talk about themselves."

Years of listening have given Vilsack the ability to forge relationships and look past differences to be one of the most effective and longest-serving secretaries in U.S. history — not unlike his favorite former ag secretary and fellow Iowan, Henry A. Wallace, who served Franklin D. Roosevelt from 1933 to 1940.

Contrary to the gridlock between the Obama administration and Congress, Vilsack has been able to direct positive — and in some ways historic — work, including passage of the 2014 Farm Bill. He also broadened USDA's outreach, leading to a greater sense of inclusion for the vast types of U.S. agriculture.

### PEOPLE MATTER

Vilsack says perhaps more than any other job he's held, including an eight-year stint as governor of Iowa, the importance of relationships is a lesson everyone needs to relearn.

"By being able to listen to people that may have a slightly different approach to a problem or circumstance, but still maintaining a relationship, it allows you to work



BOB BURGDOFFER

*Tom Vilsack serves as the nation's 30th secretary of agriculture. When asked which previous ag secretary he looks up to most, he referred to the one behind his desk — Henry A. Wallace.*

away from the edges and walk more towards the middle and find common ground," he told Farm Futures.

Vilsack is winding down what many consider to be a successful

stint as the country's top ag leader. But that success was by no means preordained. When President Barack Obama nominated Vilsack to become secretary, the Organic

Consumers Association outlined six reasons why naming him to the post would be a terrible idea, calling him a “Monsanto buddy” and criticizing him for his support of biotechnology. Other groups, longing for a reformer, expressed disappointment that the progressive-minded Obama would pick a “conventional” politician from agribusiness-oriented Iowa.

Still, Vilsack was easily confirmed and has been able to represent all.

Seven years later, one of his proudest relationship-building initiatives at USDA, he says, was fostering better cooperation within agriculture in the Advisory Committee on Biotechnology and 21st Century Agriculture. Here, producers who were passionate about either organic, conventional or non-GMO food stopped talking at each other and began uniting over

recognition that small farms matter, and that local and regional food systems are not an outlandish business model, he says.

Vilsack says he’s often asked if he prefers organic or conventional agriculture. His response is that it would be like asking which of his two sons he loves more. And it’s that appreciation for differences that has made Vilsack a champion for all of agriculture, shares Pam Johnson, an Iowa farmer.

### THE CASE FOR DIVERSITY

As most people know, the secretary of agriculture was not a farm boy. He spent many of his early professional days as a county seat lawyer in his wife’s hometown in southeastern Iowa during the 1980s farm crisis. Those adversities left an impression. Vilsack wanted to ensure farmers in the future would

biobased products. It also comes from supporting manufacturing jobs in rural areas and emphasizing regional food systems.

By focusing on advanced diversity, Vilsack says, “We are in a much better position to withstand the ups and downs of the cycles of agriculture.”

Johnson, past president of the National Corn Growers Association, has seen firsthand how Vilsack advocates for agriculture overseas and domestically, adding Vilsack is always going to bat for agriculture. “He’s a true proponent of science and technology.”

Johnson also praised Vilsack for fighting to get the farm bill passed — then hold it together when it got sabotaged. And when the Renewable Fuel Standard came under attack, he quickly helped design the blender pump program to increase consumers’ access to biofuels.

“We are in a much better position to withstand the ups and downs of the cycles of agriculture” by focusing on advanced diversity. — TOM VILSACK

what they had in common, he says.

“Some may have thought we would part the waters and miracles would occur, but what did happen was concrete specific steps were discussed and agreed upon,” Vilsack shares. “Consensus was built and a level of respect was created.”

Those previously opposed to GMOs, now recognize that the science supports their safety. There’s

not have to face the same hardships if the cycle again turned downward.

Fast-forward to 2016, where farmers do face significantly lower crop prices, yet median household incomes remain at record levels. Vilsack says some of that can be attributed to the agency’s aggressive efforts to expand exports to create more demand, and encourage the use of crops for biofuels and

Howard Buffett, philanthropist and Illinois farmer, said one of Vilsack’s greatest legacies was putting conservation on the map. He’s brought a greater focus on the need to preserve soils as a benefit for the environment and for taxpayers.

Vilsack quickly learned how USDA impacts different segments of the economy. Through the Rural Council and other White House

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initiatives, Vilsack has been focusing more on childhood poverty, hunger and drug abuse.

Vilsack says he's frustrated in how government does a poor job of explaining what it does.

"I hear people say all the time, 'I want less government.' And I always say to myself, 'I wonder what that means to the 1.1 million families provided home loans since I've been secretary.'" He went on to ask if the kind of "less government" people want would be one without food safety inspectors or loans to help start small businesses.

At USDA Vilsack stresses to not only put out a policy, but also figure out how to message the policy. "Marketing what we do is important, because most people have no idea what USDA does," he says.

And some of that messaging is catching on with organizations and Congress. With the current attacks on farming practices, Vilsack says USDA's role of building on solid messages will foster a healthier conversation about agriculture. "At the end of the day, it should create a greater confidence in our agriculture systems, and people will be more likely to support them."

Denis McDonough, Obama's chief of staff, recently said Vilsack was "surely the most effective member of the president's cabinet."

Many employees share how Vilsack "sets the bar high" at USDA. From inside Vilsack's closest circle to the appointed and career employees who surround him, he's brought inspiration with his commitment and vision to revitalize rural America. One staffer, who had worked as a civil servant within the ag department when the secretary's tenure began, says that mission and focus had been lacking in the few years prior to Vilsack taking over.

Robert Johansson, USDA's chief economist, says it's rare to see this much continuity in a federal agency, especially in the last year of an administration with people shuf-

## RAPID FIRE

**Usual wake-up time?** 6:30 a.m.

**Favorite food?** I have so many favorite foods, but I really like ribeyes. If I'm at the Iowa State Fair, there is only one favorite — pork chop on a stick.

**Cowboy boots or tennis shoes?** Cowboy boots.

**When did you first ride on a tractor?** It was at my uncle Bob and aunt Sis' in Pennsylvania. I was 10 or 11 years old. They had a small 80-acre farm that is still in the family. That is also where I shot my first pheasant.

**What have you learned from farmers through years of listening?** How rooted they are, and what they do defines who they are. Farmers do what they do because they love what they do. They feel connected to past generations and they're proud of it, and they feel there is a morality to what they do in terms of feeding the world and seeing themselves as givers. They are a resilient bunch. In the face of adversity, they are strong.

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fling in and out. He says Vilsack has a great grasp of the overall ag economy.

"He cares deeply about the rural economy and really speaks from the heart about his plans at USDA and keeps us focused on what this really means to our stakeholders, which includes not just farmers, but everyone who lives in rural America."

This connection to rural citizens goes back to Vilsack's 2009 appointment. "When President Lincoln established the Department of Agriculture nearly a century and a half ago, he called it the 'People's Department' for it was meant to serve the interests of those who lived off the land," Obama said when he nomi-

nated Vilsack. "And I know it will be the People's Department once more when Tom is at the helm."

### IMPORTANT CONVERSATIONS

Vilsack continues to share what USDA programs can do for the U.S. "He has helped spur important conversations on nutrition; managing public lands; new, beginning farmers; and using good science. And it has had a great impact on the department," says Val Dolcini, Farm Service Agency administrator.

Vilsack has also successfully leveraged government resources through public-private partnerships. Most notably is the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, which matches public with private funding to enhance conservation. He's also helped increase funding for ag research and established the research foundation to catalyze investments. With a dwindling budget, he's done more with less.

"It's not easy to be a public servant in the spotlight," Johnson adds. "Like a lot of public servants only defined by media sound bites that are critical, he's a lot deeper than that. I feel bad that farmers haven't gotten to know the true Tom Vilsack and realize all the good things he's done."

She calls Vilsack a servant-leader who never gives up. Vilsack's mother, in overcoming her own addictions, also instilled in her son the same attitude. So when all odds were stacked against him in the 1999 Iowa governor's race, Vilsack kept charging and eventually won the election. He became the first Iowa Democrat elected governor in 30 years. That tenure in the governor's office eventually led to his selection as ag secretary.

In his position, Vilsack says listening to others and letting them talk about themselves takes the pressure off of him and builds bridges into their worlds. By entering into conversations, Vilsack has been able to spread the message of agriculture others need to hear. **FF**