



TOM VILSACK

Secretary of Agriculture talks about issues facing farmers and his plans for USDA

By SIERRA DAWN MCCLAIN
Capital Press

WASHINGTON, D.C. — On Feb. 24 Tom Vilsack took the oath of office as the 32nd Secretary of Agriculture.

It's Vilsack's second time as chief of the USDA. He previously served eight years in the same role in the Obama administration.

Vilsack, 70, is also the former governor of Iowa, and most recently was president of the U.S. Dairy Export Council, a dairy trade and lobbying group.

On Monday, Vilsack sat down with Capital Press reporter Sierra Dawn McClain for a wide-ranging interview. The text has been edited for brevity and clarity.

Capital Press: On Feb. 24, President Biden issued an executive order requiring you to investigate agricultural supply chains. What do you hope to accomplish through this?

Tom Vilsack: I think, first and foremost, we want to make sure we build back the supply chain so that it's more resilient in the event of a large-scale disruption similar to COVID.

Secondly, I think there's a reason for us to take a look at the supply chain from an equity perspective.

I think the third thing is a competitive and open markets aspect. If the supply chain is concentrated in the hands of a few, it makes it more difficult for those selling to get the best price for whatever it is they're growing or raising. That's particularly true in animal protein. How do we enlarge, encourage competition, create better price discovery?

CP: That leads into my next question. You've talked a lot about the need for price discovery in the livestock sector. Can you break down how you plan to address lack of price transparency?

Vilsack: Well, it would start in taking a look at our processing facilities across board — beef, poultry, pork — and asking: Are there additional market opportunities we could take advantage of? That could happen one of three ways.

One, can we help smaller processing facilities stay in business? There are programs as a result of COVID relief to get resources to small

processing facilities that would allow them to stay in business (and) to be able to pay the costs, for example, of overtime they had to incur.

CP: Would that funding come exclusively from COVID relief?

Vilsack: It's coming from COVID relief resources Congress has provided.

... Secondly, Congress has also directed us to take a look at ways in which we might facilitate interstate sale of product, across state lines.

To do that, state-inspected enterprises would need inspections to be equivalent to the federal inspection

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Matthew Doyle/USDA

Vilsack, left, walks with Douglas Emhoff, husband of Vice President Kamala Harris, on a trip to Des Moines, Iowa. Vilsack and Emhoff were on this trip in March to show their support of the American Rescue Plan.

Klamath Project to receive historically low water allocation



George Plaven/Capital Press File

Water flows from Upper Klamath Lake into the A Canal, part of the Klamath Project.

By GEORGE PLAVEN
Capital Press

KLAMATH FALLS, Ore. — The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation delivered a gut-punch to Klamath Project irrigators Wednesday, announcing a historically low water allocation as the basin struggles with extreme drought.

Farms and ranches in the Project will receive an initial allocation of just 33,000 acre-feet — the lowest total since the shut-down of 2001 and barely 8% of historical demand.

That is dramatically lower than the bureau's original estimate of 130,000 acre-feet based on hydrological conditions at the beginning of March. Since then, snowpack

in the Klamath Basin has dropped to 72% of normal for the water year dating back to Oct. 1, and precipitation is just 67% of normal.

The Klamath Project provides irrigation for 230,000 acres of farmland in Southern Oregon and Northern California.

Camille Touton, deputy commissioner for the Bureau of Reclamation, said this water year is unlike anything the Project has ever seen.

"We will continue to monitor the hydrology and look for opportunities for operational flexibility, provide assistance to Klamath Project water users and the tribes, and keep an open dialogue with our stakeholders, the states, and across the federal government to get through this water

year together," Touton said.

Initial water supplies from Upper Klamath Lake will be available to recharge Project canals and provide for some limited irrigation no earlier than May 15. Remaining water will be delivered no earlier than June 1.

The bureau will maintain Upper Klamath Lake at or above a minimum elevation of 4,138.3 feet, "whereby additional project water may be available," according to the bureau. Reclamation will monitor and adjust available water on at least a semi-monthly basis.

Officials also announced \$15 million in immediate aid to the Klamath Project

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Washington farm groups embrace OT bill, for this season

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — The overtime bill that's likely headed to Gov. Jay Inslee will protect farms from back-pay lawsuits and give farm groups more time to convince the Legislature that time-and-a-half pay after 40 hours will harm farmworkers more than it helps them.

The bill, Senate Bill 5172, phases in overtime pay for farmworkers. The threshold will be 40 hours a week in 2024. Before then, the thresholds will be 55 hours in



The Washington House on April 9 passed a bill to give all farmworkers overtime pay.

2022 and then 48 hours in 2023.

Farm groups had lobbied for a seasonal exemption, allowing a

farm to choose 12 weeks a year to pay overtime after 50 hours a week. Labor groups and majority Democrats rejected the provision.

Farm groups contend that without an allowance for agriculture's uneven work schedule, farms will struggle and workers will see their hours limited and incomes cut.

"We can say that until we're blue in the face, but until it comes from workers who are disproportionately affected, the Legislature won't act," Washington Farm Bureau associate director of government relations Breaune Elsemy said Monday.

The House passed the overtime legislation on a 91-7 vote Friday. The House made no policy changes to the bill passed by the Senate but lumped all provisions into one section.

"We do expect the Senate to concur and for this version to move forward," Elsemy said.

Before Friday's vote, Vancouver Rep. Larry Hoff, the top-ranking Republican on the House Labor and Workplace Standards Committee, said the seasonal exemption

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