

# Vilsack questions surging input costs

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**  
Capital Press

The USDA needs to look closely at surging input costs for farmers, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack says.

“Are all of these increases absolutely justified?” Vilsack asked.

He spoke Feb. 16 during a “fireside chat” at the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture’s winter policy conference.

Vilsack cited a recent Wall Street Journal article in which a seed company executive said the company would raise prices to handle supply chain issues, adding the phrase, “and then some.”

“And then some? What’s that all about?” Vilsack said. “Farmers don’t need ‘and then some.’”

It’s important for USDA to ask questions about whether “every penny of these increases” is justified based on disruptions, supply and normal economics, Vilsack said.

“And if they’re not, then shame on anybody who’s trying to take advantage of

this circumstance,” he said.

USDA can also continue to create market opportunities that support higher prices for commodities, he said.

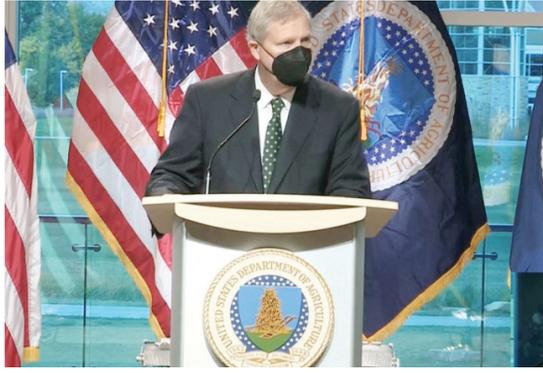
“At the end of the day, you’d love to have high prices and low input costs, but if you can’t have that, at least you want the high prices, so farmers at least have a little bit of wherewithal to be able to withstand some of these shocking prices that they’re currently facing,” he said.

USDA needs to invest in research for improved precision technology, sensors and drones, but also to develop more efficient fertilizers, Vilsack said.

The agency could support farmers with risk management tools. If a grower decides to apply nitrogen once during the growing season instead of twice, USDA could help if the farmer experiences a production loss, Vilsack said.

Other topics Vilsack covered include:

• On “climate-smart commodities”: “We’re able to say to the rest of the world, ‘Hey,



USDA

**Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack spoke to the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture.**

agriculture is doing its part, it’s moving rapidly to net zero.’ I believe we can get there faster than a lot of the other industries that have to get there. Whether it’s construction, transportation or utilities, I think agriculture is in a position to really make headway here.”

• USDA’s Local and Regional Food Aid Procurement Program: “I think we learned during the pandemic that as efficient and productive as our system is, it wasn’t as resilient as we thought it

was. ... You have to create the muscle memory in terms of being able to link the local and regional production to a market opportunity.”

• On arguments that animal agriculture is a “significant contributor” to climate challenges: “I want to be in a position to be able to forcibly push back on that notion by pointing to what farmers and ranchers are doing and will do that can be part of the solution. For a country that is getting serious about climate, you can’t get it done without

rural America being heavily involved in, heavily invested in and doing its part.”

• Early adopters of climate efficiency and carbon sequestration: Vilsack wants adequate funding for and increased investment in existing conservation programs like EQIP and the Conservation Stewardship Program.

USDA wants those farmers involved and engaged in pilot programs to collect data and quantify results, he said.

“So that we can tell those food companies with great confidence, ‘Here’s what farmers are doing, here’s the result they’re getting and here’s the value created now for your food processing company,’” he said. “We expect and anticipate that that value is going to be shared with the producers.”

“Those early adopters, they’re not getting credit because nobody’s keeping score,” Vilsack continued. “This program allows us to keep score.”

• Renewable fuel: “We’ve got an aviation industry that is begging, begging for

drop-in aviation fuel (completely interchangeable with conventional fuels) that’s biofuel. Begging for it. Want to buy it today,” he said. “That’s a 35 billion-gallon, not blended, drop-in. Holy cow. What an opportunity. ... We’ll carve out resources to make sure that even the smallest of farms can participate. And the large guys can participate as well.”

Vilsack pointed to “enormous and amazing” opportunities to positively impact farmers’ and ranchers’ bottom line and revitalize the rural economy.

“We’re talking about transitioning from an extraction economy, where we’ve been taking things off the land and basically creating wealth, opportunity and jobs someplace else,” he said. “And basically bringing that back — creating a more circular economy where those opportunities, that wealth, those jobs are created right where the natural resource advantage is, in rural places, on farms and ranches and rural communities that serve those farms and ranches.”

# Innovations on horizon in ag supply chain

By **SIERRA DAWN MCCLAIN**  
Capital Press

ARLINGTON, Va. — It’s no secret that the U.S. is struggling with serious supply chain challenges. But there’s cause for optimism, experts say — innovations that could improve agricultural supply chains long-term are on the horizon.

On Feb. 15, the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture, or NASDA, hosted an “agricultural supply chain” panel discussion at its winter 2022 policy conference featuring leaders of ports, freight networks and similar organizations. These leaders said that while there aren’t many immediate solutions, longer-term innovations that are underway offer hope.

“There’s room for opti-

mism, especially in infrastructure,” said Lowell Randel, senior vice president of government and legal affairs for the Global Cold Chain Alliance.

Federal dollars — in part through the infrastructure package passed last year — are on the way to cities nationwide, which experts say could bolster shipping infrastructure.

But simply having money is not enough to guarantee success, said Alice Ancona, senior vice president and chief operating officer of the World Trade Center Miami.

One problem with the infrastructure bill, panelists said, is that it doesn’t explicitly include funding for truck parking or truck stops with amenities — infrastructure that Ancona said is critical.

Since federal and state



Port of Los Angeles

**Supply chain experts say that while there aren’t any easy or quick solutions to the global shipping and trucking crisis, long-term innovations could help improve the industry in the months and years to come.**

funding hasn’t made truck parking a priority, Ancona has taken matters into her own hands. When Miami recently received funding to create a parking station for passenger use only, Ancona worked with officials and industry

leaders to tweak the project so half of the parking lot could be for passenger vehicles, the other half for trucks.

Florida has also been serving as a testing ground

for autonomous trucks, said Ancona. A self-driving semi-truck successfully drove along the Interstate 10 in a December trial.

“It went well,” she said.

However, Ancona acknowledged that while it may be easy to deploy automated trucks in Florida — a flat, warm state — crossing into other states could prove difficult.

John Eisen, director of the intermodal motor carriers conference at American Trucking Associations, agreed that driverless semi-trucks are in the industry’s future, but not for a while.

“It’s coming. I just think it’s going to take probably longer,” said Eisen.

Eisen said he thinks technology will play a major role

in improving trucking overall.

Jim Titsworth, general director of agriculture for BNSF Railway, the largest freight railroad network in North America, agreed that technology is transforming supply chains.

“We’re seeing tremendous leaps,” said Titsworth.

Titsworth said railroad industries are expanding automation and designing locomotives capable of running on natural gas and other diesel alternatives.

Changes may also be on the horizon for ports.

James McCurry, chief administrative officer for Georgia Ports Authority, said ports have been innovating by creating “pop-yards” offsite to relieve congestion.

# NASDA announces top 10 priorities for new farm bill

By **SIERRA DAWN MCCLAIN**  
Capital Press

ARLINGTON, Va. — The National Association of State Departments of Agriculture has announced its top 10 priorities in the new farm bill.

The National Association of State Departments of Agriculture, or NASDA, is a nonprofit association representing the elected and appointed officials who run the departments of agriculture in all 50 states and four U.S. territories.

Ted McKinney, CEO of the association, made the announcement during the organization’s 2022 winter policy conference.

The last farm bill was passed in 2018. As policymakers in Washington, D.C., are gearing up for the next edition, NASDA will advocate for specific policy priorities.

“Often the officials closest to farmers themselves and as co-regulators with the federal government, NASDA members are uniquely positioned to lead, impact and direct policymaking solutions for the 2023 Farm Bill,” said McKinney.

According to McKinney, the top 10 priorities, in alphabetical order, will be animal disease, agricultural research, conservation and climate resiliency, cybersecurity, food safety, hemp, invasive species, local food systems, specialty crop block grants and trade promotions.

McKinney said that devastating disease out-



**‘COVID REALLY SHOUTED THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS.’**

**Ted McKinney, CEO of The National Association of State Departments of Agriculture**

breaks over the past few years, such as with African swine fever, have revealed the need for the next farm bill to include further investments in preventing the start and spread of disease.

NASDA will also advocate more federal investments in agricultural research, McKinney said, including in the field of automation.

State agricultural department officials also plan to advocate more climate-related programs in the upcoming farm bill, such as those that incentivize farmers to use or change certain management practices.

“We’re deeply into conservation and climate resiliency,” said McKinney.

After major recent cybersecurity problems surfaced — including a cyber attack on meatpacking giant JBS last year — McKinney said it’s clear the next farm bill needs to include investments in better programs and protections against such attacks.

NASDA will also be advocating changes to food safety policies in the upcoming bill and looking for ways to help farmers meet new requirements.

McKinney said the organization also sees the

hemp sector as an opportunity for federal investment via the farm bill — but the crop also presents challenges.

“There are lots of opportunities in hemp, but it’s also the wild, woolly West in hemp,” he said.

The previous day, McKinney had talked with officials who govern agriculture departments in Western U.S. states about the challenges they face in managing the hemp sector, including concerns over water misuse.

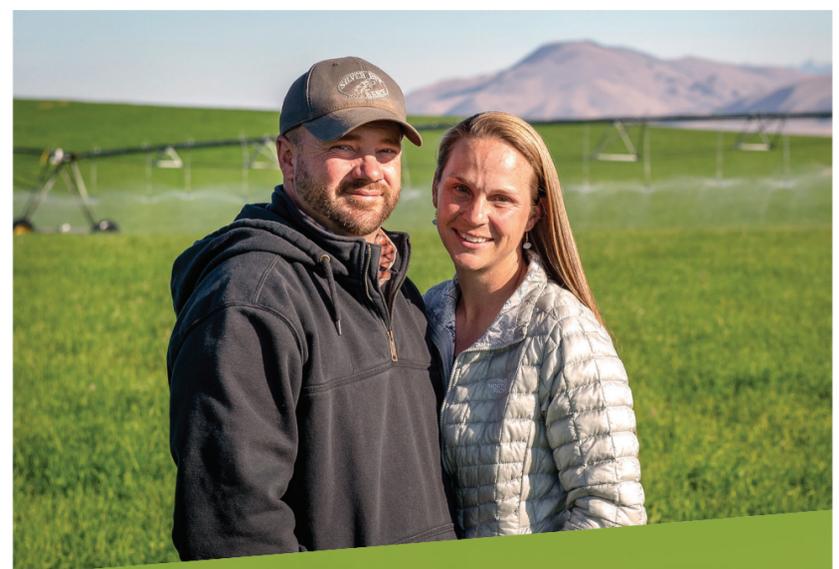
Invasive species will be another top priority for NASDA.

The association also plans to advocate for more federal investments in local food systems, including in farm-to-school programs.

“COVID really shouted the importance of having local food systems,” said McKinney.

NASDA will also push for the farm bill to invest further in specialty crop block grants.

Finally, the association plans to push for the farm bill to support states in promoting trade of their own farm goods with other countries or provinces — “something very near and dear to my heart,” said McKinney, who has participated in state-level trade missions.



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