

Transcript of video statement by U.S. Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Kathleen Merrigan, to the third annual Organic Summit, Stevenson, Washington, June 3, 2009.

Good morning, everyone. It's a pleasure to join you, even remotely, for your third Organic Summit. I want to thank the Organic Farming Research Foundation, New Hope Natural Media, and all the efforts that brought this strong collaboration together that brings about this exciting event.

Thanks everyone in the audience, each of you, for your part in the tremendous strides in the organic sector during the past decade. Many of us are old friends, and I feel like I'm back home. I've worked closely with brother Bob Scowcroft, Mark Lipson, and so many of you in the past decade—or longer than the past decade—as the organic world has come together on a number of initiatives. The organic policy trajectory—as Bob likes to put it—is what I want to talk about today. We've come a long way from the time when we wrote the legislation, to when we came together on organic standards during the tenure of Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman, when we announced the proposed rule for national organic standards and we all got so seriously involved in USDA politics.

Thanks in large part to your efforts, US organic production has more than doubled in the past decade and the consumer market has grown even faster. Organic food sales have more than quadrupled from 1997 to 2007. We've come a long way. *I've* come a long way. And not only in gains that we can quantify. Running on parallel tracks are the changes that have been evolving at USDA and in Congress. New to the policy agenda a decade ago, organic agriculture is becoming institutionalized at USDA, cutting across agency lines and programmatic mandates.

Here is where I'd like to fulfill a promise that I made to many of you when we released the national organic standards back in the Clinton Administration days, and that is, organic should be across all the agencies. Not just the NOP under the Ag Marketing Service, but each and every agency at USDA should have some engagement with the organic sector. I liken it to the SARE program. As many of you know, I was a part of writing that legislation, too, and there was a time when anything that had to do with sustainable agriculture was sent to the SARE program and the research agencies at USDA. Times have changed. Now across USDA, different institutions and agencies are involved in sustainability. We need to have that same sort of thing happen with organic. That's the eye on the prize that I have in my new position.

Along these lines, I want you to know that the National Organic Program executive position has been announced, and will close June 30. This is the individual who really has to dig in and work with the regulations, the staff and the industry, as well as the senior policy officials in the administration. So the NOP needs to be elevated, have its own full time executive. That's going to strengthen our standards program, then we need to talk about the rest of USDA. This is a tremendous responsibility for this new job—I want everyone to apply for this. We want the best people who are excited about government service to come forward, the program has matured and grown and now it demands an executive who is dedicated full time.

On the legislative front, we're very pleased at USDA that organic agriculture gained strong support from Congress in the 2008 Farm Bill. To mention just a few highlights—and a lot of this is thanks to the work of all of you in this audience—and I know that OFRF was working very hard on this. Congress saw fit to focus on the organic program authorizing a huge increase in research funding. With this measure both sides of the aisle sent a powerful signal about their vision for the organic program. These research dollars will go toward production, breeding, and processing methods. They'll help develop seed varieties particularly suited for organic agriculture. That's so important. And [research dollars will] look at some of the constraints to expanding organic agriculture from the marketing and policy side.

On the production side, the Farm Bill offers farmers new provisions to meet the challenges of organic agriculture. Last month I had the pleasure of announcing a \$50 million national initiative to help organic farmers and those transitioning to organic production through the EQIP program. This effort sets aside a pool of money specifically for organic farmers and those transitioning to organic, to help them find ways to protect the natural resources on their land. This is about more than conservation, it's about opportunity—giving organic farmers funding incentives to adopt conservation practices and making sure that we extend that opportunity to limited resource, beginning, and socially disadvantaged farmers. These producers and our small farmers are very important to us. The Agriculture Census that we released a few months ago shows a continuing trend toward more small and very large farms and fewer mid-sized operations. As our friend Fred Kirschenmann aptly describes, “the disappearing middle.” We'd like



to see some of these small farms that we're noting in the census migrate into mid-sized operations. Organic agriculture is one way to help them get there. It's a growth opportunity for smaller producers and a way to repopulate our rural communities. USDA can be part of this effort by promoting community supported agriculture and farmers markets. These are important ways to link urban residents with fresh, locally grown producers and help local growers at the same time. As Secretary Vilsack has said, we have a lot of work to do in this area.

USDA is also helping smaller producers through some new efforts, like our first-ever, wide-scale survey of organic farming in the US. The organic production survey is a direct response to the growing interest in organics among consumers, farmers and businesses. The fact is, this sector is growing so fast that information, from production and marketing practices to income and expenses, is desperately needed. And this kind of data will help us do more across USDA and in conversations with our members of Congress, to talk about organic needs. But the survey will only be as effective as the response we get from organic producers. The official deadline for the survey is June 17. I strongly urge all of you in the organic community to take advantage of this opportunity to tell the story, share information, and have a voice in shaping policy program decisions.

Along these lines, I'm also delighted to tell you that just yesterday USDA released a new report, *Emerging Issues in the U.S. Organic Industry*. This is a terrific overview of the rise in consumer demand for organic food in the past decade, helped in large part by USDA's regulatory program and label. It's an ERS report—I'm looking forward to reading it myself. Among other issues, the report highlights fluctuating market conditions that have characterized the U.S. organic sector and the challenges still to be overcome. I urge you to take a look at the report, you'll find it on ERS's website. You'll find it (to be) a fine resource, I'm sure, and I commend Kitty Smith (ed. note: Smith is the Administrator of USDA's Economic Research Service, and is also currently Acting Deputy Under Secretary for USDA Research, Education & Economics) and the others that brought about this important document.

Now, while USDA has been moving forward on these and many other fronts, there's also been a certain amount of activity around the department since January 20 in support of organic agriculture. You probably saw we got a lot of press. Shortly after Secretary Vilsack took the reins at USDA, he jackhammered a strip of asphalt in front of the building to start a people's garden, graphically demonstrating the administration's battle against childhood obesity and the importance of fresh, nutritious food and healthy eating. The people's garden is organic: organic and sustainable. Also a pollinator's garden is there. In many ways it's a master garden for environmentally responsible practices, showing by example how gardens absorb carbon dioxide and the community role in raising awareness about global warming.

We have a president who has put nutrition, the environment and climate change high on the USDA priority list. President Obama wants to expand the capacity of our land, our farms and ranches to produce alternative forms of energy and fuel. He's stressing research that will help agriculture transition away from its significant dependence on fossil fuels. As I stand here before you I just left a meeting at the White House where we were talking about agriculture, childhood obesity, school-based gardens and local food systems. Issues all of you have been working on for decades. And now they are front and center at the very highest levels of this administration.

Here, at the USDA for the first time, USDA has a senior advisor for environment and climate, Robert Bonnie, he joins us from the Environmental Defense Fund, talking a lot about climate change and figuring out what the role is in agriculture and how farmers can claim credit for the good things they do.

So, as you can see, organic agriculture can no longer be stove-piped at USDA into a single mission or program. It's part of almost everything we do from research and conservation, to nutrition and energy, marketing and trade. The secretary often reminds us that we need all kinds of agriculture in this country. He looks at the big picture. And we need to be concerned about more than 300 million Americans—we need to think about the six billion people who live on this Earth, and the reality is that number will continue to grow. The capacity to produce food, food assistance and access to food through trade are all critical to food security. Organic agriculture must be a part of this equation.

Toward that end, I want you to know that we're confident that we'll have an equivalency agreement with Canada. This will be an historic agreement, beneficial for our producers and consumers. Equivalency means our producers will not have to learn yet another set of standards, and that means reducing the cost of certification. Trade can continue smoothly, and as you know, that benefits everyone, producers and consumers. Achieving this is a first step



toward global harmonization of organic standards among the world's two largest trading partners, and that will be a highly important step for us to take.

The next thing on the horizon for the NOP is this is going to be an era of strong enforcement. We've spent a lot of time developing standards and now let's make sure they have teeth, they are followed, adhered to—very important. And that's where some of us began, back in 1989, drafting the federal legislation.

So my thanks for giving me this chance to share a big picture view of organic agriculture at the start of this administration. We—all of us together—have a lot of history, and we have many challenges ahead of us. You all there—you are a brain trust for organic, and I need you to percolate really good ideas and bring them our way. I look forward to working with you as always, as we push toward our common goals, and continue this outstanding path of progress. Thank you.

