

TESTIMONY OF BRIAN T. BAENIG

SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION AND FORESTRY

THURSDAY, JULY 28, 2011

Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Roberts, and Members of the Senate Agriculture Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today as the nominee for Assistant Secretary of Congressional Relations at the United States Department of Agriculture. Chairman Leahy, thank you for that kind introduction. When you hired me nearly 10 years ago, I could have never imagined sitting on this side of the table. Your leadership, guidance and friendship have been invaluable to my personal and professional life.

Madam Chairwoman, Members of the Committee, it is a great honor to be nominated by President Obama to serve as Assistant Secretary of Congressional Relations. It is a true privilege to be asked to serve in this role. Should I be confirmed, you have my commitment that I will work diligently to live up to the high standards and expectations that the Administration and this Committee have set, and to always be receptive to all of your requests and concerns.

I treasure the Congress as an institution and I hold dear the long bipartisan tradition of this Committee. As you know, I have worked for Senators Wellstone, Leahy and Lincoln. I have been honored to work for a diverse group of Senators who all had the same bipartisan passion for supporting America's farmers and ranchers and rural communities. I will bring that same passion and commitment to my work each day if I am confirmed for this position.

Having served on this Committee as a staff member, I feel strongly that straightforward communication between the Department of Agriculture and Congress is critical to the legislative process and essential to the position for which I am being considered today. While your positions on specific issues may not always match those of the Secretary or the President, I will always be responsive to your requests and respectful of your concerns and questions. And, while I may not always have the answers you are looking for immediately, I commit to find the answers and always to be fair, honest, and straightforward with you and your staff.

I am keenly aware of the current budget situation that we all face, and the tremendous obstacles that this presents. Yet I believe we must always remember that America's farmers and ranchers and our agriculture sector are responsible in no small way for the health and strength of this great nation. Not only does American agriculture produce the highest and most abundant quality of food, feed, fiber, and fuel at affordable prices, but American producers preserve our environment, sustain our rural communities and help drive our national economy.

Along with Secretary Vilsack, I am committed to working with this Committee to ensure that the next farm bill retains a strong and effective safety net for all of American agriculture. If confirmed, I pledge to work closely with each of you, and your staff, to make all needed resources available to you during this process. I believe that we share the goal of ensuring that American agriculture and our rural communities remain productive and competitive and working

together I am confident we can accomplish that goal, as this Committee always has, in a strong bipartisan manner.

The Department of Agriculture has an aggressive agenda to serve our Nation's farmers, ranchers and rural communities. The Department is focused on delivering results that create jobs and promote innovation in our rural communities. If confirmed, I look forward to helping with this important work. In addition, I want to emphasize my commitment to two major priorities of the Department. First I pledge to work closely with this Committee to implement the three pending bilateral trade agreements. Exports are critical for the future of American agriculture. In addition I want to pledge my active support for civil rights at the Department. Secretary Vilsack has been a leader in making this a priority at USDA, and I share his strong commitment to civil rights. If confirmed, I pledge to do all that I can to ensure that discrimination, in any form, is not tolerated.

Finally if you would grant me a moment I would like to recognize a few people who have joined us today and are very special to me. Nancy Smetanka, Jayne Visser and Dirk Visser, thank you for your support today and always. To my mother, Linda Baenig, thank you for your love and guidance.

Madam Chairwoman, Ranking Member Roberts, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I also want to express my gratitude to President Obama and Secretary Vilsack for the confidence in me to take on this important responsibility. If supported by this Committee and confirmed by the United States Senate I look forward to building a strong working relationship with each one of you. Again, thank you, and I look forward to answering any questions that you may have.