

TESTIMONY OF RAJIV J. SHAH, OF WASHINGTON STATE, TO BE UNDER SECRETARY OF RESEARCH,
EDUCATION, AND ECONOMICS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

MAY 7, 2009

Mr. Chairman, Senator Chambliss, members of the Committee, I am honored to be nominated by President Obama to the position of Under Secretary for Research, Education and Economics and Chief Scientist. I appreciate Secretary Vilsack's confidence in me and his invitation to join his leadership team at the Department of Agriculture. I want to thank Senator Cantwell for her generous introduction and for her passion and commitment to the people of Washington State. Also, I would like to take this opportunity to introduce my wife, Shivam Mallick Shah, and our two children – Sajan and Amna – who turn four and one this summer and are with us today.

I am excited by the opportunity to lead the research portfolios of the Department of Agriculture at a time when this work touches so many of our national challenges -- agricultural production, nutrition and food safety, energy independence and the sustainability of our natural resources.

I also recognize the responsibilities of serving as the Chief Scientist. President Obama has often emphasized his commitment to ensure decision-making is based on scientific evidence, and if confirmed I will seek to help carry out that mandate.

As the founding director of the agriculture program at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, I have had the opportunity to meet agricultural scientists from around the world and I have drawn inspiration from many of them. One of my heroes is Dr. Norman Borlaug – the only agricultural scientist to win the Nobel Peace Prize for his use of science to help prevent widespread starvation. His life is a testament to the fact that effective agricultural research, coupled with an absolute determination to make the world a better place, can help address our most pressing challenges.

These challenges have been stated clearly by Secretary Vilsack.

Food production must meet the needs of a world population that will exceed 9 billion by 2050. And it must do so while taking into account a warming planet and the need to be efficient in the use of water, nitrogen and other key inputs.

Agriculture has the potential to provide a sustainable source of energy at a time when the President, the Secretary and members of this committee have highlighted the need for our nation to work toward energy independence. Second and third generation biofuels and advanced biomass strategies are critical to this task. Agriculture and agroforestry may also have opportunities to participate the administration's efforts to reduce carbon emissions. Effective agricultural research could help identify and quantify those opportunities.

And Americans are increasingly aware of the critical links between agriculture and human health. All Americans rely on strong agricultural science as it relates to the safety of our food supply, protection against animal diseases, including zoonotic diseases that transmit from animals to humans, and the critical role that a healthy, nutritious diet can play in preempting and preventing many of the chronic

diseases affecting Americans – diseases like obesity, diabetes, and hypertension. We can and should do more to identify these links, connect to the health community, and work to ensure every American can identify and access a healthy diet.

Last year an additional nearly one hundred million people entered into extreme poverty – resulting in nearly one billion people going hungry. President Obama has called for our agricultural research, education and aid institutions to work together to demonstrate American leadership in preventing global hunger. If confirmed, I will seek to contribute to this goal.

With the founding of the land grant university system in 1862 and the critically important 1890 schools, the United States set the foundation for becoming the world leader in agricultural production based on the strength of its agricultural research. By linking research, education and extension, these schools continue to innovate and provide needed solutions for rural communities and American consumers. The Agricultural Research Service, which developed the original method for large scale production of penicillin (and did so in time for its use during World War II), also has a storied history.

Last year this committee laid the groundwork for taking this leadership into the future by creating the National Institute of Food and Agriculture. Establishing a new National Institute is a unique opportunity to create a strategic, focused and result-oriented research enterprise that can help bring improved agricultural research to bear in serving our nation's food, health and energy needs. I believe there are important lessons to be learned from the National Institutes of Health and other federal research efforts that could inform this task. If confirmed, I look forward to working with the Committee to implement this important provision of the Farm Bill.

The Economic Research Service, National Agricultural Statistical Services and National Agricultural Libraries also represent critical assets in any effort to make research and policy relevant to American producers and consumers. In creating the Agricultural Development program at the Gates Foundation, I became a regular consumer of the work of these agencies.

I share Secretary Vilsack's commitment to addressing civil rights concerns as a top priority throughout the Department. I also share the Secretary's aspiration to modernize the Department's technology platforms. If confirmed, I hope to use modern information and communication technologies to improve the transparency, effectiveness and outcomes of the science and research portfolios.

I became a medical doctor to care for and hopefully heal individuals. I quickly became absorbed in broader issues of public health and economics as I felt that was a path to serve larger populations. That path has given me the opportunity to work with children on obesity issues in the Philadelphia schools, to help children in poor countries gain access to life-saving immunizations, and, most recently, allowed me to launch an agricultural development program to address the global crisis of extreme hunger and rural poverty.

In each area, I have tried to learn from others, to be pragmatic and fact-based in the pursuit of solutions, and stay focused on the goal of making a difference in people's lives. If confirmed, I intend to bring that same spirit of learning, energy for service and commitment to outcome to this position.

Thank you Mr. Chairman, the Ranking Member, and the Committee for the opportunity to appear before you today. I again want to thank President Obama and Secretary Vilsack for their confidence in me to lead this important work. Finally, I want to thank my wife Shivam whose willingness to support me in this endeavor has allowed me to embrace this important new challenge.