

**TESTIMONY OF THE HONORABLE DALLAS P. TONSAGER**  
**SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY**

**May 7, 2009**

Thank you, Chairman Harkin, Senator Chambliss, and members of the Committee. It is a privilege to sit before the committee which continues to provide the leadership and foresight for the benefit of all of agriculture and rural America. Specifically, I want to acknowledge your leadership Chairman Harkin and Ranking Member Chambliss and should I be confirmed, I will enjoy working with you to improve the quality of life for rural Americans.

I also want to thank Congresswoman Herseth-Sandlin for her kind introduction today. I have learned a great deal about how to help rural communities by watching Congresswoman Herseth-Sandlin leadership in South Dakota.

It is an honor to appear before you today as President Obama's choice to be the next Under Secretary of Rural Development at the United States Department of Agriculture. Seated behind me, I am proud to be joined here today by my son, Keith and his wife, Lindsey; my son, Joshua; and my wife, Sharon, without whom I could not have pursued my passion of advancing the cause of Americans who reside in our small towns and rural communities. I am glad my family is here to share this moment with me.

It is indeed a great honor and privilege to be selected by President Obama to carry out his vision for the revitalization of rural America. I am excited by the opportunity to serve with Secretary Vilsack who is a strong advocate for America's agricultural producers and defender of rural residents throughout this country. My enthusiasm is tempered only by the realization of the challenges rural Americans face every day with lost jobs, disappearing essential services, outmigration, and crumbling infrastructure. We find ourselves in difficult times. President Obama's vision for America is aggressive and will take commitment, sacrifice and perseverance to be successful. I want the members of this committee to know that should you confirm me, I will accept this responsibility.

Mr. Chairman, I am not telling you or the members of this committee anything you do not already recognize. You know all too well the challenges we face in addressing the needs of the 50 million Americans residing in our small towns and rural communities. The farm bill, written by this committee and passed last year, and the stimulus package passed earlier this year, provide the foundation and funding for many of the President's initiatives.

The President has rolled out an appropriately ambitious and multi-faceted plan to stimulate the faltering economy. In the area of rural economic development, the President's vision focuses on several important goals.

- First and foremost, the funding provided in the stimulus package to Rural Development will be allocated as quickly as possible at the same time ensuring that it is awarded in a fair, transparent, and responsible manner.
- Renewable energy is not only critically important for the rural economy, it is important for the entire U.S. economy and national security. The burgeoning renewable energy industries will grow the U.S. economy, make the U.S. more energy independent, and help address climate change. USDA Rural Development has a number of programs to advance renewable technologies that will bring skilled jobs to rural communities.
- Broadband access to rural residents is also a key to bringing important services to rural residents and providing skilled jobs. Thanks to this committee's insistence, the stimulus package provided significant additional funding for the deployment of broadband access. I know that this is an important issue for members of this committee.

In all of these areas, I pledge to work with you and your staffs to ensure that we identify the communities with the greatest need.

Of course, Rural Development has many other programs that will aid rural residents and their communities so that they can thrive and prosper. Rural Development has a strong portfolio of housing, community facility, and business and utility programs that provide the building blocks for community development.

Agriculture and rural communities are dependent upon one another. It is my experience that farmer-owned, value-added enterprises can breathe new life into small towns and communities. Rural Development's Cooperative Services and the Value-Added programs provide agricultural producers the tools to work together to receive the maximum value from their land and their labor and bring jobs to a community. It takes teamwork and cooperation to be successful, especially within rural development. If confirmed, I will work to bring all parties to the table - community leaders, planning districts, council of governments, cooperative development centers, community development corporations, land grant universities, and others - to develop projects and successful development strategies.

As a former State Director for Rural Development, I know and have worked with the employees of USDA's Rural Development and have great respect for the work they do and their dedication to the mission of rural economic development. If confirmed, I look forward to rejoining my former colleagues and together we will do our very best to find solutions to the challenges rural communities face. I will be a tireless advocate for the constituents we are all sworn to serve.

With that in mind, I also want emphasize my commitment to working to resolve any outstanding civil rights claims whether in program or employment practices. If confirmed, I will not tolerate any form of discrimination in the agencies that I will be leading, and I look forward to working with Secretary Vilsack to address this very important issue.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, as a farmer and life-long resident of a rural community, as a South Dakota Rural Development Director during the Clinton Administration, as an Executive Director for the South Dakota Value-Added Agriculture Center, and currently as a Farm Credit Administration Board Member, I have spent most of my professional, adult life in and around agriculture and rural communities. And, challenges notwithstanding, if confirmed, I look forward to rolling up my sleeves to do what I can to renew the hopes of rural Americans everywhere so that America, specifically rural America, will once again prosper.

Thank you.