

Opening Statement of Thomas J. Vilsack Before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry – Remarks as Prepared

Thank you, Madame Chairwoman, Ranking Member Boozman, and members of this Committee.

I am grateful for your time today considering the challenges facing our nation and the many critical decisions before the Senate. I also want to extend my sincerest gratitude to President Biden for nominating me to serve our nation in this critical Cabinet position. I know we all share a deep and profound respect for the women and men working at the U.S. Department of Agriculture and throughout the food supply chain to ensure our nation's food security and, if confirmed, I will work with you to better protect their health and safety.

The world and our nation are different today than when I served as Agriculture Secretary in a previous administration. Then, a Great Recession challenged us. Today, the pandemic, racial justice and equity, and climate change must be our priorities. Amid these mounting challenges, we are tasked with delivering fundamental services—safe and nutritious food, clean water and last-mile broadband, energy security, sound infrastructure, and business services. In rural America—which holds a special claim to USDA's mission—we must build back better, stronger, and more resilient and equitably than ever before.

If confirmed, I will take bold action and work with this Committee to address discrimination in all its forms across USDA agencies, offices and programs. I will ensure all programming is equitable and work to root out generations of systemic racism that disproportionately affects Black, Indigenous and People of Color. I will build the most diverse team in the Department's history, one that looks like America, and will extend that commitment across all USDA agencies and offices.

We must also recognize that the pandemic has ravaged our economy and communities. That's why, if confirmed, I will ensure USDA is doing its part to end the pandemic. Our federal agencies have a responsibility as employers, service providers to the public, and as government-to-government partners with Native and Indigenous communities to bring all resources to bear. That commitment begins by doing all we can to distribute the vaccine so that we can get our economy back on track. It also means following the science, instituting science-based measures and providing access to PPE to protect our workforce and partners. Our USDA food safety inspectors, for example, deserve not only our thanks for ensuring a safe food supply—they deserve knowing we have their backs.

The pandemic has also exposed the disturbing truth about hunger and nutrition insecurity in America. Today, 30 million adults and as many as 17 million children—more than 1 in 5 Black and Latino households—report they do not have enough food to eat. This, in and of itself, is an epidemic worthy of a coordinated, national response. That's why, if confirmed, I will work with this Committee and state and non-profit partners to remove barriers to access for anyone who qualifies for federal nutrition assistance—SNAP, WIC, Pandemic-EBT, school meals and more. Our nation also suffers from nutrition insecurity. We must do more to ensure access to the nutritious foods that can protect and promote health. Making stronger, more resilient connections between our nutrition assistance and local and regional food systems is critical to winning this public health battle.

We have the world's most productive and innovative farmers. But the farm economy is suffering due to the pandemic, years of consolidation, and natural disasters brought on by climate change. If confirmed, USDA will lead the federal government in building and maintaining new markets in America that diversify rural economies; producing healthy, local and regional foods; investing in renewable energy; creating a thriving biobased manufacturing sector; embracing sustainable and regenerative practices that enhance soil health; and delivering science-based solutions to help mitigate and reduce climate change. We must stop the farm debt cycle and create transparency in pricing throughout the supply chain; expand

overseas markets and give U.S. agriculture a level playing field; and harness USDA's expertise in science and conservation to work with farmers, ranchers and forest owners to create new sources of income tied to their good climate practices. This includes recognizing the important role our National Forests and all forested lands play as the best natural carbon capture that exists. To respond to the challenge climate change presents to conserving, preserving and growing healthier forests, we need a strong commitment to forest management and restoration.

Finally, when I served as Secretary previously, USDA leapt from near the bottom of the list in job satisfaction to seventh among all Federal departments. Morale was high because we included staff in decision-making, protected scientific integrity, and provided a safe, fair and rewarding workplace for all employees. If confirmed, I commit to this and more.

In closing, to all the people living and working in rural America—our brightest days are ahead.

I welcome any questions the Senators may have. Thank you.

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