

# Vilsack in Japan: Rising ag output key to ending hunger

By Heather Lilienthal

Countries around the world need to recognize the need for increasing agricultural productivity to combat poverty and food insecurity, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said last week during a visit to Japan.

“Last year, the United Nations estimated that 1 billion people were malnourished. That number has dropped to 800 million, but it’s still far too many,” Vilsack said at a Global Food Security Symposium in Tokyo. “As a global community, we need to respond.”

Overcoming hunger, Vilsack said, will require more than money. Instead it will require a carefully constructed strategic plan that uses natural resources, increases food production and improves trade relations and agreements, the former Iowa governor said.

“We need to recognize that we need to increase the availability of food, and that means increasing productivity,” said Vilsack. He stressed the need for more research in areas of soil analysis and seed technology.

“That’s why we see a role for biotechnology,” he said. “We’ve seen (biotech success) in our country and countries around the world.”

While biotechnology will help farmers raise more food, increased trade will be necessary to get the food to an increasingly urban population, explained Dr. Robert Thompson, a University of Illinois professor who addressed challenges regarding poverty, production and population following Vilsack’s comments.

Populations have moved to urban areas, and Thompson said the number will grow to more than 70 percent by the middle of the century.

“Food demand will exceed production capacities and they’ll become net importers,” he said.

An Iowa delegation, made up of Iowa Agriculture Secretary Bill Northey and farmers and representatives from the state’s pork, beef, soybean, and corn associations and the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, had the opportunity to welcome Vilsack and his wife, Christie, at a short reception the night before the symposium. It offered the visiting Iowans a chance to reflect upon the information they’d collected during their trade, production and food discussions in South Korea and Japan and pose questions to Vilsack.

While Iowa is poised to meet production and export needs, they are concerned about free trade agreements and limited market access.

“We got a new sense of urgency while discussing the free trade agreement in South Korea,” said Northey. “We in ag would love to be active in gaining support for that in Congress.”

Vilsack said the Obama administration is very supportive of the free trade agreements. But he cited concerns with automotive company problems, violence in Columbia, labor issues in Panama and balancing agreements among countries.

“We are looking to break down barriers in those countries,” he added. “I don’t think we have the votes today (to move toward ratification of free trade agreement with South Korea), but at the USDA, we are working with what we can control to enhance trade.”

Hull cattleman Stan Zylstra inquired about the possibility of raising the age of cattle for Japanese beef imports. Vilsack responded: “We hope to see significant improvement (in the beef market access). It’s not an easy issue.”

Responding to the case of BSE in 2003, Japan has restricted U.S. beef imports to meat from cattle slaughtered at no more than 20 months of age. Later in the week Vilsack proposed a transitional solution that would ease the age limit over time, but Japanese officials say the two countries remain far apart.

Regarding biofuels, Vilsack said he expects the biodiesel tax credit, which was allowed to lapse in Congress, would be extended. He said he also hopes that the Environmental Protection Agency will approve increased levels of ethanol for non-flex-fuel vehicles.