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News Release

Release No. 0578.09
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AGRICULTURE SECRETARY DISCUSSES IMPORTANCE OF ADDRESSING CHILD HUNGER, HEALTH AND NUTRITION

Testifies at Senate Agriculture Committee on the Opportunities to Address Critical Issues During Reauthorization of Child Nutrition Programs

WASHINGTON, D.C., Nov. 17 - Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack today testified in front of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Environment on the opportunities to combat child hunger and improve the health and nutrition of children across the country during the upcoming reauthorization of USDA's Child Nutrition Programs.

Below are excerpts from Vilsack's prepared testimony:

"The reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Programs presents us with an important opportunity to combat child hunger, improve the health and nutrition of children across the nation, and enhance program performance.

"The scale of these programs means that reforms can have a major impact on tens of millions of school children. For instance, the National School Lunch Program serves 31 million school children in more than 100,000 schools across the country. The School Breakfast Program is available in over 88,000 schools and about 11 million children participate on an average day.

"The Obama Administration takes this opportunity very seriously. In the Fiscal Year 2010 Budget, the Administration proposed a historic investment of \$10 billion in additional funding over ten years for the Reauthorization.

"The problems that we are challenged to address through this reauthorization process are significant, and critical to the future of our country.

"At the same time, we face a continuing problem for some families being unable to provide their children enough to eat. Yesterday, the Department released a report, 'Household Food Security in the United States, 2008' showing that in over 500,000 families with children in 2008, one or more children simply do not get enough to eat--they had to cut the size of their meals, skip meals, or even go whole days without food at some time during the year. This is simply unacceptable in a nation as wealthy and developed as the United States.

"This legislation is an opportunity to in one stroke confront both the challenges of obesity and hunger - with the prospect of better health and well-being in the years to come. Investing in meal quality and access to these critical programs will help support the capacity of our young people to learn and acquire

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the tools necessary to become the leaders of tomorrow.

"We can improve access to meals and explore new means of empowering communities to reduce food insecurity and hunger, especially among our children. We can make every school a place where nutrition and learning shape the food offered by improving meal standards, eliminating foods that do not support healthful choices, and expanding physical activity opportunities.

"Beyond these food security, nutrition, health and learning objectives, the reauthorization is an important opportunity to promote economic development and a robust farm and food economy. The Child Nutrition and WIC Programs are significant outlets for the bounty of American farmers and ranchers. Each year, USDA purchases approximately \$1.5 billion of healthy foods through its commodity distribution programs. These purchases help support for the entire agriculture value chain - from growers to packers, shippers, manufacturers, to retailers.

"This legislation is critical not only for the nutrition, but for health promotion, educational opportunity, and economic development. For these reasons, I want to share the Obama Administration's top priorities for this legislation and to express my commitment to work with you to pursue a robust reauthorization that advances these key priorities.

"For many children in our programs, School Lunch and Breakfast represents the only healthy food that they eat all day. We must work to ensure access to nutrition assistance for children, when and where they need it, particularly during the 'gap periods,' when we know children struggle to receive the nutrition they need- summer months, during breakfast, and in after-school environments.

"We also need to expand the School Breakfast Program. Healthy days begin with healthy breakfasts. Many teachers report that they can tell which of their children had healthy breakfasts and which did not. While 100,000 schools offer lunch, only 88,000 offer breakfast. And only about 11 million children receive school breakfasts on an average school day, compared to 31 million for lunch.

"To increase the number of schools offering breakfast and the participation of eligible children in the program and look for ways to support improvements in the nutritional quality of school breakfasts as well.

"To expand participation in school meals more generally, we must find and test innovative approaches and determine their effectiveness in addressing hunger among children, including modifications to counting and claiming processes in very low-income areas.

"Support should be provided to communities and States committed to ending the scourge of hunger. And support should be provided to direct certification efforts that automatically enroll eligible children in these programs. The Department will use the \$22 million in the Direct Certification grants recently approved in the agriculture appropriations bill to encourage States to enhance their existing direct certification systems with new technologies or with ideas borrowed from States with demonstrated direct certification success.

"We must do everything we can to improve the nutritional quality of school meals and the health of the school environment. A recent Institute of Medicine report showed that the average American child between the ages of 5 and 8 consumes about 720 empty, discretionary calories per day - nearly half their total diet of about 1,600 calories per day. Our young people are eating far less dark green and dark orange vegetables than they need, far fewer fruits than they need, far more refined grains and far too few whole grains, and far too much high-fat dairy products and too few low fat or non-fat dairy products. We must do better.

- Additional support should be provided to train school food service professionals so that they have the skills to serve top-quality meals that are both healthful and appealing to their student customers.

- Expand the current requirements of the food safety program to all facilities where food is stored, prepared and served.
- Every parent knows that encouraging children to try new foods can be challenging. But because children are developing preferences and practices that will last a lifetime, it is especially important that we recognize and support the role that school food service professionals play in serving foods that demonstrate that a healthful diet can be tasty and fun.
- But our approach should also reflect the critical role that the whole school environment - not just the lunch room - can play in the effort to promote healthful lifestyles and combat obesity.

"Not only should USDA establish improved nutrition standards for school meals, but we should set national standards for all food sold in schools, including in the à la carte lines and in vending machines, to ensure that they too contribute to a healthy diet. This step is long overdue and critically important to enhancing the health of the school environment. And we need to strengthen school wellness policy implementation and promote physical activity in schools.

"But to be truly successful in making our schools a healthier environment - we will need input and help from parents and communities. More information must be provided to American parents on the performance of schools so that they can make choices for their children, and take action to help schools improve. We recommend that schools be required to share information about the content of their meals with the families that rely upon them. And we should work with stakeholders to develop and communicate common nutrition messages and provide materials in support of those messages.

"Lastly, we must continue to advance the public trust by investing in school meal performance. Through technology and training, we can reduce error rates and resolve management challenges in ways that serve our school children and the general public.

"Several weeks ago, through passage of the Agriculture Appropriations bill, Congress made an important first step toward accomplishing these goals. Thanks to the leadership of Chairman Lincoln and Senators Chambliss and Harkin, and Chairman George Miller, we will be able to improve children's access to meals during the summer, help enroll more children in the School Lunch Program and improve health and nutrition in child care settings. I view this as an important down payment on the priorities mentioned above."

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