

Coalition Call with Secretary Vilsack and Deputy Secretary Bonaugh on UN Food Systems Summit

Friday May 28, 2021

Notes

On Friday, May 28th Coalition representatives from over 30 organizations met with USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack and Deputy Secretary Jewel Bonaugh as well as other USDA staff including Jason Hafemeister, Robert Bonnie, and Elise Golan. The goal of the call was to highlight the importance of strong and strategic USDA leadership on the UN Food Systems Summit (FSS) in developing USG positioning, coordinating interagency efforts, and driving support of other allied countries.

After opening the call, Krysta Harden from USDEC provided an overview of the Coalition. Jim Messina provided an overview of the coalition main messages and asks followed by specific examples and feedback from Coalition members (NAMI, NAWG, AFFI, AFIA). The Secretary and USDA staff then provided remarks.

Overview/Key-Takeaways

- Overall, the call was positive with Secretary Vilsack noting that USDA is moving forward with the development of positions on FSS, working closely through an interagency process through bi-weekly calls, and is engaging on international outreach with counterparts
- Secretary Vilsack reassured the Coalition members that USDA is taking every effort to engage on FSS. However, he acknowledged the Agency must do a better job of communicating their efforts externally as there is a disconnect between what USG is doing internally vs. what is being communicated publicly.
- It appears that USDA/USG's positions on FSS are forthcoming and that they may reflect the Coalition's general principles, such as diversity of food systems. However, it is unclear if/when these positions will be made public, or how much it is being coordinated with other USG agencies.
- It is also unclear whether or not USG will only encourage U.S. positions that support *positive ideas* proposed in the context of the FSS, or if it will also **push back** on those ideas that are potentially problematic.
- Along with Secretary Vilsack, Deputy Secretary Bonaugh will be taking a leadership role in the FSS and will be "very involved in the process." She noted she is looking forward to engaging with the Coalition.
- Secretary Vilsack offered the opportunity for continue engagement and information sharing with the Coalition through regular meetings with a small group of Coalition representatives.

Call Notes

USG Positioning

- Secretary Vilsack noted that he has personally reviewed the policy statement that is being developed at USDA on FSS and expects it to be aligned with the points the Coalition expressed.
- Secretary Vilsack noted that the US believes in diversity of food systems including the need for diversity in producers, production systems and the size of operations. He also highlighted the importance of science and rules based trade systems.
- Secretary Vilsack noted that USDA/USG in the process of developing a range of commitments and deliverables for FSS that are focused on 1) Need for both food and

nutrition security; 2) Need for production resiliency; 3) Need for adaptation and mitigation strategy for climate change that is consistent with science (mentioned gene-editing); 4) Advocating for continued investment in research and development.

Interagency Process

- USDA is heavily engaged with other USG agencies and Secretary Vilsack has specifically discussed the FSS with Secretary Blinken.
- USDA is active in the interagency working group that includes 17 other agencies.
- Robert Bonnie noted that USDA is front and center and is in the leadership position in the interagency process. Recently, FSS was included as a topic of discussion for the National Security Council.

International Outreach

- In terms of international outreach and coalition building, Secretary Vilsack noted they are communicating with the general of FAO and other international leaders on FSS. Jason Hafemeister noted that USDA has engaged with 15 ministers of agriculture across the world.
- They are developing the connections needed to “reinforce basic messages.”
- Secretary Vilsack specifically noted that Brazil is one example of a like-minded country that shares our concerns and may be able to help push back on EU specific policies.

FSS Process

- Secretary Vilsack noted that they have leadership positions on the Action Tracks and are engaged in both the Action Tracks and the Advisory Committee.
- Deputy Secretary Brounagh noted the importance of including all voices in the Summit Dialogues and requested USDA be notified if it is missing anyone.

Coalition Comments

- Krysta Harden, of USDEC opened the call noting that the UN FSS and July pre-Summit ministerial offer great promise for the U.S. to advance core agricultural and climate priorities. However, the Summit also poses significant risks if its outcomes reflect certain political agendas or ideologies that are inconsistent with U.S. agricultural and climate priorities.
- Julie Anna Potts from NAMI, Chandler Goule from NAWG, Alison Bodor from AFFI and Constance Cullman from AFIA provided remarks on behalf of the Coalition membership. Comments highlighted the importance of diversity in U.S. food and agriculture and that complex problems need complex solutions; the critical role of innovation; and the importance of science-based, balanced positioning in the FSS process.
- Jim Messina, of the Messina Group and Coalition team, then laid out the key coalition messages including that:
 - o Robust political leadership by USDA has the best opportunity to positively shape U.S. positions and strategies and ensure that counterparts in other agencies are sufficiently prioritizing the UNFSS.
 - o It would be helpful to have a clear understanding of U.S. positions on key priority areas and a better sense of what is being formally fed into the Summit process and have the opportunity to weigh in on these if possible.
 - o It is essential that USDA do what it can to encourage U.S. positions that support positive ideas proposed in the context of the Summit, but also push back on those ideas that are inconsistent with the U.S. approach to food and agricultural production, denigrate international trade, and/or seem targeted against common U.S. practices.
 - o There continues to be major concerns with the FSS process, including a lack of transparency and oversight by Member States in what is being proposed. To be successful, coalition efforts need to include developing a groundswell of UN

Member States willing to assert a much stronger role for UN Member States in vetting the proposals that the UN DG and Summit leaders recommend.

- o The food/agriculture supply chain is ready to partner with USDA and the inter agencies to help expedite the creation of a short list of proposals to promote and proposals to work against.