Testimony of Thomas J. Vilsack

Secretary of Agriculture

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Chairman Lucas, thank you and thank you to Rep. Peterson and members of the Committee for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss an important topic to American agriculture – the complex issues surrounding biotechnology and USDA's role in regulating it.

Today's meeting considers a topic that is critically important to U.S. agriculture. Over the last two decades, we have experienced the rapid development, and the widespread adoption by producers, of new technologies like biotechnology. Biotechnology has already delivered significant benefits to farmers and consumers and it holds tremendous promise for agriculture here in the United States, and around the world. Over the past twenty years, due to improved plant breeding practices and biotechnology, yields have increased and new varieties are being developed that will resist pests and drought, and reduce the amount of water and fertilizer needed to raise a crop. Recognizing the benefits of these products, today, more farmers are planting biotech varieties of crops. We believe that biotechnology stands to play a significant role in our effort to support our drive toward energy independence, conserve our natural resources, and meet the world's growing demand for food, feed, fiber, and fuel.

At the same time, there has also been strong growth in the organic sector, and in non-genetically engineered production, all to meet the requirements of specific and expanding markets.

The growth of all these sectors is great for U.S. agriculture. It means farmers, ranchers, and growers have a range of ways to meet consumer needs and preferences both here and around the world. It means they can grow their operations in the way best for their operation while contributing to the success and vitality of rural America.

The growth and promise of biotechnology—the fact that it can provide a critical assist in meeting domestic and global challenges, including food security and climate change—is due in large part to the innovative culture of American agriculture. I need to state clearly and emphatically – I have no doubt about the safety of the products our regulatory system at USDA has approved over the last two plus decades and that it will continue to approve in the months and years ahead.

The rapid adoption of GE crops has coincided with the rapid expansion of demand for organic and other non-GE products, resulting in real, practical difficulties for some non-GE producers to meet the need of their markets. These conflicts have produced ongoing litigation and resulted in uncertainty for producers and technology innovators. We are at a crucial juncture in American agriculture where the issues causing the litigation and uncertainty must be addressed, so that the potential contributions of all sectors of agriculture can be fully realized.

USDA'S BIOTECHNOLOGY REGULATORY PROGRAM

As part of USDA's efforts to expand U.S. agriculture, we must ensure that our regulatory oversight is timely, consistent, effective, and grounded in sound science. We must ensure that we keep pace with

the latest scientific developments, and that we do so transparently. The Plant Protection Act gives the Secretary of Agriculture, and through delegated authority the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), the ability to prohibit or restrict the importation, exportation, and the interstate movement of plants, plant products, certain biological control organisms, noxious weeds, and plant pests. It is under these authorities that APHIS regulate the importation, interstate movement, and safe field testing of GE organisms. In regulating biotechnology products, APHIS works closely with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, as part of the Coordinated Framework for Regulation of Biotechnology. The three agencies work together to ensure the development, testing, and use of biotechnology products occurs in a manner that is safe for plant and animal health, human health, and the environment.

USDA's biotechnology program has been in place since 1986, and APHIS has developed a framework for regulating biotechnology that is rigorous and based on sound science. Since the program began, APHIS has overseen the safe adoption of numerous biotechnology products, with 26,000 field trials grown under our notification procedures and 3,000 field tests conducted under our permitting process, which encompasses field trials at 86,000 different locations. In addition, we have deregulated over 75 products.

It is not a static program. To farmers, ranchers, and growers, it is one that has grown and evolved as technology – often driven by the needs and demands of producers – has changed. As we move forward, we must be cognizant of the needs of all producers and all types of production.

CHALLENGES FACING THE BIOTECHNOLOGY REVIEW PROCESS

We are also at a crossroads with the Department's ability to handle the demands of industry and producers. The length of time it takes APHIS to complete the petition process has increased dramatically, and we are engaged in a process improvement process to reduce the amount of time. However, the combination of an increased number and complexity of the petitions combined with the time consuming litigation has really slowed us down. I fear that if we don't address these issues comprehensively, innovation will be discouraged not encouraged.

The procedural legal challenges related to GE sugarbeets and GE alfalfa have taken years. APHIS made its initial decision to deregulate GE alfalfa in June 2005. Yet here we are nearly six years later with the process not yet concluded. GE sugar beets were granted non-regulated status in March 2005, and the case is still in litigation in federal court. As these cases continue, the market uncertainty increases, and those involved in agriculture lack sufficient guidance for planning and determining how to react or which products to use.

The situation needs to be resolved. The legal challenges, and the resulting effects, have created uncertainty for all growers. Growers need to order seed and make planting decisions, but have difficulty when the legal challenges cause so much uncertainty. There are companies and researchers who have devoted significant resources to developing safe products that can help us meet our food security needs, but find themselves fighting in the courts, or waiting to see how a judge's decision in a separate case will affect them.

I strongly believe that the decisions regarding these critical issues should not be decided solely by the courts. Litigation creates uncertainty and often results in winners and losers. To help minimize that

uncertainty, as well as the other impacts and costs of litigation, USDA is committed to seeking solutions that will end or limit litigation and thereby benefit agriculture as a whole.

ROUNDUP READY ALFALFA

On December 16, 2010, the USDA released its final environmental impact statement (EIS) on the potential environmental effects of granting genetically engineered alfalfa non-regulated status. This is the line of alfalfa that has been genetically engineered to be resistant to the herbicide commonly known as Roundup.

The EIS provides an exceptionally comprehensive evaluation and analysis of the potential environmental impacts of granting or denying the petition for non-regulated status. In addition to the draft EIS's two alternatives of either granting or denying non-regulated status, the final EIS examined a third alternative that was included in the response to ideas presented during the comment period. This third alternative analyzes the impacts of establishing geographic restrictions and isolation distances for GE alfalfa's production, and it mirrors a healthy and productive conversation between GE, non-GE, and organic interests that is already underway in the industry and that continues to evolve. Every interest engaged in the conversation shares the goal of protecting the right of every producer to grow on their land what they believe and decide is best. And, I believe that many participants have found the discussion important and beneficial.

Some have questioned the need for this discussion and have suggested USDA is moving away from a science based, rules based decision making process. I want to reassure everyone that USDA will continue to adhere to a scientific, risk based decision making process and that our decisions will continue to be driven by science. I look forward to our discussion here and I hope you share my belief that farmers, ranchers, and growers are in the best position to decide what is best for their operations.

Again, I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to appear before you this morning and I look forward to answering any questions that you may have.