Tom Vilsack Returns as Secretary of Agriculture

By Leo O’Drudy, OPACE
Phone: (202) 720-8693

On Feb. 24, Tom Vilsack was sworn in for the second time as Secretary of Agriculture.

In the Biden-Harris Administration under Secretary Vilsack, USDA is committed to transforming America’s food system. With this is a greater focus on more resilient local and regional food production, fairer markets for all producers, ensuring access to healthy and nutritious food in all communities, building new markets and streams of income for farmers and producers using climate smart food and forestry practices. The focus also includes committing to equity across the Department by removing systemic barriers and building a workforce more representative of America.

Vilsack is a former two-term Governor of Iowa, and also was an Iowa State Senator and mayor of Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. Between 2009-2017, he served as Agriculture Secretary during the Obama-Biden administration. Prior to returning to USDA, he served as president and CEO of the U.S. Dairy Export Council from 2017 until February 2021.

Vilsack has been honored for his public service and work to advance American agriculture by several organizations, including the Congressional Hunger Center and the Global Child Nutrition Foundation. He is a former member of the board of directors for GenYOUth as well as Feeding America, a nationwide network of more than 200 food banks that feed more than 46 million people through food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, and other community-based agencies.

Vilsack was born into an orphanage in Pittsburgh in 1950 and adopted in 1951. After receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree from Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, and his J.D. from Albany Law School in Albany, New York, he moved to Mt. Pleasant, Iowa (his wife Christie’s hometown), where he practiced law.

Learn about the latest updates from the Secretary to USDA employees — including the recent all-staff town hall — at the OneUSDA Intranet (https://intranet.usda.gov/secretary-updates). Watch a recording of the recent town hall on this YouTube video.
FSIS Employees Recognized with Secretary’s Honor Awards

By Laura Reiser, OPACE and Michael Dendinger, OEED
Phone: (202) 720-7894 and (540) 383-0507

At the Secretary of Agriculture’s Honor Awards ceremony on Jan. 12, FSIS employees were recognized for their outstanding contributions in 2020 to support American agriculture and society. Each year the Secretary honors USDA employees, the highest award given in the Department. This time, 11 FSIS employees, representing two FSIS teams and one multiagency team, received awards. FSIS employees who were honored have expressed their appreciation for teammates and colleagues who also supported the efforts.

This year’s ceremony was hosted by former Secretary Sonny Perdue as a virtual event from the USDA headquarters complex in Washington, D.C. Due to the limited capacity for participants, the Department recorded the ceremony and made a list of recipients and the recording available through the USDA intranet at https://intranet.usda.gov/update/secretarys-honor-awards. (Requires eAuthentication.) The employees who were honored and the USDA Strategic Goal they supported are provided below.

Consumer Safety Inspector Reclassification Project
Strategic Goal 1: Ensure USDA Programs are Delivered Efficiently, Effectively and with Integrity and a Focus on Customer Service.

This FSIS team processed 4,000 personnel classifications and ensured that the hiring process remained uninterrupted, while allowing FSIS the flexibility to deploy consumer safety inspectors to any regulated establishment and complete a full range of duties.

(Pictured, from left:) Heather Schuldt, Jerry Button, Jamie Torres, Abigail Woyke and Jean Kern-Regis. This award was presented by Acting Deputy Under Secretary for Food Safety Paul Kiecker (pictured, top). Image capture by Laura Reiser, OPACE.

Torres said, “My mindset was always on the employees in the field; if I can give them one less thing to worry about, I’m more than happy to put in the extra effort.”

Schuldt explained, “I am extremely honored to have been nominated and selected to receive such an important award. We had a goal and always kept our employees in mind when we got tired or felt like we couldn’t go any longer. Also, many thanks to the entire human resources Minneapolis Office. We couldn’t have been as successful without everyone.”
This month marks one year since the COVID-19 outbreak was declared a national emergency and the word “coronavirus” became part of our everyday vocabulary. Our dedicated field personnel were designated “essential,” with food production deemed a part of our Nation’s critical infrastructure. You’ve made sure that Americans continue to enjoy safe meat, poultry and egg products during one of the most challenging times in our history.

A year later, I’m excited that we have a new word in our pandemic vocabulary — vaccine. Vaccines are one of the most effective tools to protect your health and prevent disease. Now, the COVID-19 vaccine is a powerful tool to fight the coronavirus. We’ve been wearing masks, washing our hands and practicing social distancing for months. Getting vaccinated adds one more layer of protection for you, your coworkers, your family and your loved ones.

As essential workers, our frontline personnel may be eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccine now or in the coming months. FSIS leadership has been working to encourage state agencies to prioritize vaccination for our field personnel, including in-plant and lab employees. I strongly encourage you to get vaccinated through any avenue available to you, which could include your local health department, vaccine clinics, the establishment where you work, doctor’s offices, hospitals or retail pharmacies. Check with your state to learn more about how the COVID-19 vaccine is being administered in your area and how you can sign up.

You can find answers to some common questions about the vaccine on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s website at https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/faq.html. I hope each of you will seriously consider the benefits of vaccination so that you can be ready when the vaccine is available to you. We each have a responsibility to do everything that we can to help end this pandemic. Thank you for your commitment to food safety and public health.

Rural America is also facing unprecedented hardships and USDA can help rural areas build back better, stronger and more equitably. FSIS brings excellent jobs to rural communities, with opportunities for career advancement. I have followed these paths of opportunity myself, as FSIS has allowed me to advance from the position of food inspector to Acting Deputy Under Secretary for Food Safety. FSIS is also committed to equity and inclusion, and we strive to build and maintain a workforce that reflects the diversity of this country we serve.

As agricultural industries consolidate, USDA can help level the playing field for small and medium businesses and support open markets and fair competition. Through our outreach to small and very small plants, we ensure that these businesses have the tools, guidance and resources they need to comply with food safety regulations and provide a safe product. Every FSIS regulated establishment should have the same opportunities for success, regardless of its size.

I know that FSIS employees will support these priorities and drive USDA towards these goals. The food safety tasks that you perform every day impact millions of Americans and ensure that families have safe food to eat. Thank you for your hard work and dedication.

We often say that USDA touches the lives of Americans every day. With its exceptional reach, the USDA will play an important role in tackling many of the challenges facing our country today and in the future. USDA is prepared to be a leader in supporting the National Strategy to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. We have public health expertise, facilities and relationships established in communities across the country that can support the response. But most importantly, our efforts start at home with us — with USDA employees. The Agency will continue to make sure you have access to required protective equipment, like masks and face shields, and will look for ways to support and protect you as you perform your duties.

Rural America is also facing unprecedented hardships and USDA can help rural areas build back better, stronger and more equitably. FSIS brings excellent jobs to rural communities, with opportunities for career advancement. I have followed these paths of opportunity myself, as FSIS has allowed me to advance from the position of food inspector to Acting Deputy Under Secretary for Food Safety. FSIS is also committed to equity and inclusion, and we strive to build and maintain a workforce that reflects the diversity of this country we serve.

As agricultural industries consolidate, USDA can help level the playing field for small and medium businesses and support open markets and fair competition. Through our outreach to small and very small plants, we ensure that these businesses have the tools, guidance and resources they need to comply with food safety regulations and provide a safe product. Every FSIS regulated establishment should have the same opportunities for success, regardless of its size.

I know that FSIS employees will support these priorities and drive USDA towards these goals. The food safety tasks that you perform every day impact millions of Americans and ensure that families have safe food to eat. Thank you for your hard work and dedication.
New FSIS Website Launched

On March 3, our new FSIS website went live. This significant modernization effort is based on input from employees across FSIS, and feedback from external partners and stakeholders. The site better represents and reflects the critical work all of you do on a daily basis and will help ensure that food safety is more transparent and accessible to everyone. The redesign is a significant shift in how we communicate — not just with external stakeholders, but also with our current and prospective employees. Check out the resources available in the new Employees section of the site and the Careers section of the new site. To provide feedback, questions or to note issues, please email FSISFeedback@usda.gov.

...Continued from page 2

U.S.-China Phase I Agreement Negotiation
Strategic Goal 3: Promote American Agricultural Products and Exports.

The multi-agency team secured new, expanded or restored market access for U.S. meat and poultry, seafood, fruits and vegetables, dairy products and infant formula, animal feed, pet food and more. Team members were from the Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS), Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) and FSIS.

[Image of the team]

“It was an honor to represent FSIS in this group award,” stated Robinson-Verloop. “It is an excellent demonstration of the collaborative efforts across the U.S. Government ... that made the implementation of the agreement such a success.”

FSIS Regulatory Reform: Swine Slaughter Inspection
Strategic Goal 7: Provide All Americans Access to a Safe, Nutritious and Secure Food Supply.

FSIS finalized a rule that modernizes swine slaughter inspection to allow FSIS to maintain 100 percent carcass-by-carcass inspection, while making better use of FSIS resources and allowing for companies to innovate. FSIS finalized a rule on swine slaughter inspection requiring additional microbial testing and greater focus on inspection tasks that have a direct impact on food safety.

[Image of the team]

Sheldon said, “I was part of a team on the project, worked closely with FSIS colleagues and could not have completed the project without the efforts of those team members.”

“Thank you to everyone who worked tirelessly over the years to craft a modernized vision into feasible regulations, policy and inspection verification,” said Pasko.

“I am both thrilled and gratified,” said LaBarre. “This award recognizes a great team effort, and I am happy to accept it in honor of all my teammates from the project.”

Getting your COVID-19 Vaccine? Show us your shot!

The COVID-19 vaccination is an important tool to help us end the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the vaccine supply is currently limited, the federal government is working to make vaccines widely available for everyone at no cost.

When you go to get your COVID-19 vaccine, ask if you can snap a photo right before, during or after your COVID-19 vaccine and show us your shot! High quality photos should be sent as .jpg files to Beacon@usda.gov along with your name, location and caption. We’re all excited to see these critical vaccines reaching FSIS employees.
Dr. Juan F. Rodriguez, Director of the FSIS International Liaison Office in Mexico City, Mexico, has worked for FSIS for over 26 years. In May 2017, FSIS opened the Mexico City Office. In his current role with the Office of International Coordination (OIC), Dr. Rodriguez represents FSIS in Mexico, Central America, South America and the Caribbean on technical issues pertaining to the import and export of meat, poultry and egg products to promote their safety for international trade.

His FSIS Career Path

Dr. Rodriguez began his FSIS career in the Office of Field Operations in 1994 as an in-plant supervisory medical officer in Puerto Rico. Four years later, he became a frontline supervisor, overseeing a team of employees working at FSIS-regulated facilities in Maine, New Hampshire and Massachusetts.

He moved to Washington, D.C., in 2009 after accepting a position as a veterinary medical officer (VMO) with the Office of International Affairs’ Export Programs Staff at headquarters. In 2014, Dr. Rodriguez became a senior program auditor with the Office of Investigation, Enforcement and Audit’s International Audit Staff where he conducted on-site evaluations of foreign food safety systems for equivalence to U.S. requirements. His next move was to the FSIS Mexico City Office in 2017.

Of his contributions to OIC, Dr. Rodriguez’s supervisor, FSIS International Coordination Executive Dr. Michelle Catlin, said, “Dr. Rodriguez has extensive knowledge and expertise from years of experience in a number of different positions with FSIS, a solution-oriented approach to his work and a natural ability to work with others. With all those attributes, Dr. Rodriguez has substantially improved FSIS’ relationships with countries throughout Central and South America, improved those countries’ understanding of our food safety inspection system, helped ensure the safety of imports from those countries and increased the confidence those countries have in the safety of FSIS-regulated exports.”

Changes in the Past Year

Prior to the pandemic, Dr. Rodriguez’s position required occasional travel to other countries in the geographic region his office covers. Much of the work could be accomplished remotely by way of telephone conference calls, but some of the work, such as delivering seminars to groups on food safety topics, were transitioned to software platforms such as Microsoft Teams during the pandemic.

Dr. Rodriguez also has used such platforms to successfully engage in “face to face” discussions with his counterparts in foreign countries to address many issues involving exports (e.g., certificate language changes that would allow additional FSIS regulated products to enter a foreign market and stuck shipment issues), imports (e.g., equivalence determination requests from foreign countries and investigations involving point of entry violations of foreign products arriving in the U.S.) and providing technical assistance to foreign countries on new and existing FSIS inspection methods.

FSIS Empowers Through Training

Dr. Rodriguez believes FSIS empowers all its employees, especially those in frontline positions, to carry out the job of protecting public health. “The training we receive provides us with the knowledge we need to ensure public health is being protected. And the resources and tools the Agency makes available for us to carry out our mission have a direct impact on our ability to do so,” he said.

Because he believes food safety is a global concern and he enjoys helping others, he is fulfilled by his work. Said Dr. Rodriguez, “I feel very proud of the work I do, working with colleagues from foreign countries who are in pursuit of creating food safety standards that are effectively implemented in their countries with the overall goal of making the food supply safer and protecting public health.”

The Early Years and Military Service

Born and raised in San Juan, Puerto Rico, Dr. Rodriguez was interested in pursuing a career in agriculture from a very young age. His mother shared with him her love of growing and taking care of living things. This led him to earn two degrees — his Bachelor of Science degree in Animal and Poultry Science in 1981 and his Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (D.V.M.) degree in 1987 — from Tuskegee University in Alabama.

After receiving his D.V.M. and a short stint working for an equine practice, Dr. Rodriguez became a Commissioned Officer in the U.S. Army, where he served until 1993. As a VMO with the U.S. Army Veterinary Corps, he was responsible for both animal care and food inspection. Said Dr. Rodriguez, “My military experience prepared me very well for the work I carry out in FSIS. My military
SNAPSHOTS FROM

Watertown, Wis.

On Feb. 21, Acting Deputy Under Secretary for Food Safety Paul Kiecker (pictured, second from left) visited FSIS inspection personnel at M-1962, a harvest and further processing establishment. Kiecker spoke with the inspectors about export policies, including ideas to improve efficiency, such as remote signing of certificates by public health veterinarians.

Pictured, front row, from left: Supervisory Public Health Veterinarian Dr. Kevin DiVerde, Kiecker and Frontline Supervisor Dr. Catherine Pierce. Pictured, back row, from left: Consumer Safety Inspector Aaron Yelton, and Food Inspectors Dagoberto Prieto Sandoval and Gavin Winkler. Photo courtesy of Dr. Catherine Pierce, OFO Des Moines District.

Lake Mills, Wis.

Food Inspector-Processed Products Mickey Sanborn (pictured, left) and Frontline Supervisor Dr. Catherine Pierce (pictured, center) visited with Acting Deputy Under Secretary for Food Safety Paul Kiecker (pictured, right) at Establishment G-46611, an in-line egg breaking plant. They discussed topics such as regulations for egg products and obtaining personal protective gear using the reasonable accommodation process. Photo courtesy of Dr. Catherine Pierce, OFO Des Moines District.
Cottage Grove, Wis.

On Feb. 21, Acting Deputy Under Secretary Paul Kiecker (pictured, right) visited Establishment M-45392, a very small plant that specializes in culled cattle harvest and further processing. Kiecker met with (pictured, from left) Supervisory Public Health Veterinarians (SPHV) Dr. Zafeer Din and Dr. Catie Hawkins and Frontline Supervisor Dr. Catherine Pierce, and they discussed the SPHV position, such as the type of work performed, retention, advancement opportunities and work/life balance. Photo by Erik Malvesti, OFO Des Moines District.

Cottage Grove, Wis.

Consumer Safety Inspector Kevin Follmann (pictured, right) welcomed Kiecker to Est. M-45392 where they discussed post-mortem inspection on a carcass that required public health veterinarian disposition. Photo by Dr. Catherine Pierce, OFO Des Moines District.
More than Just a Job
By Gillis A. Middleton-Smart, OFO Atlanta District

For 20 years, I’ve been an FSIS food inspector. I often reflect on all the times that I — and the thousands of other food safety inspectors who are located all over this country — have donned white lab coats, hardhats, latex gloves, and now face masks and face shields. I recognize that we are truly the frontline specialists behind the distribution of safe meat, poultry and egg products that are ready to be prepared into wholesome and healthy meals each day.

Although we are aware of the potential risks of working during a pandemic, I think of FSIS inspectors as a different type of first responder. We have an important role to play in keeping America going. It is our responsibility to every person in this country to perform our daily tasks to the best of our abilities to ensure safe and wholesome food is processed. For thousands of food inspectors like myself, food safety is more than just a job — it’s how we make a difference.

Mix It Up with Recipes from Your Colleagues
By Felicia Thompson, OPACE

Tired of cooking your usual fare? Try preparing one of these recipes that your FSIS colleagues have discovered across the pond or at home here in the U.S.

While you prepare these recipes, be sure to follow the Food Safety Basics — clean, separate, cook and chill — to keep yourself and your family safe.

From David Thornton, Consumer Safety Inspector, Office of Field Operation’s Raleigh District

A few years ago, I was grocery shopping and purchased prepped portabella mushrooms in the “Great for grilling” section next to prepped kabobs. They were delicious! I try to eat a few meatless meals a week for health and I didn’t even feel like we had missed the meat. I tweaked the recipe a bit and determined that liberally coating the mushrooms with olive oil first and prepping them the night before yields the tastiest results. These mushrooms are a frequent guest at our dinner table! Bon Appetit!

Grilled Portabella Mushrooms
Serves 5-6

Ingredients:
5-6 portabella mushroom caps
½ cup red, yellow and/or orange (1 per serving) sweet bell pepper, diced
Olive oil to coat mushrooms
5-6 teaspoons minced garlic
5-6 rosemary sprigs (1 per mushroom)

Directions:
1. Select fresh, nice looking caps (no broken edges or slimy spots). DO NOT wash caps! If there appears to be any dirt on the caps, wipe gently with a paper towel. DO NOT wipe or damage the gills. Trim stem to ½ inch or break off.
Spring Into Action for Safety
By Leo O’Drudy, OPACE

On Sun., March 14, Daylight Savings Time began again, and lasts until Sun., Nov. 7.

Smoke and carbon monoxide detectors are commonplace in American homes. Smoke detectors are usually noticed when smoke fills the air from someone having burned dinner or when there’s a true emergency, like a room fire. Other than that, they are forgotten because we know they are there and trust that their batteries are fully charged.

Daylight Saving Time shifts twice a year, and it’s a good time to replace the batteries in all detectors. However, the American Red Cross and the Consumer Product Safety Commission recommend that alarms be tested every month, not just twice a year. They also recommend detectors be placed on every level of the home, inside each bedroom and outside of sleeping areas. If you do not have them, now is the time to buy and install them.

In recent years, more and more such detectors have 10-year batteries, but it’s important not to be complacent. If your devices have sealed 10-year batteries, then check whether their expiration dates have arrived; if so, replace the detectors. For devices under 10 years old with ordinary batteries, replace their batteries with each time change.

Women Who Were First
By Suzanne Hensell, OPACE

First celebrated in 1987, Women’s History Month is a time to reflect on the contributions of such renowned American women as abolitionists Sojourner Truth, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Harriet Tubman; women’s rights activists Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton; and civil rights activist Rosa Parks. Notable “firsts” include: Amelia Earhart, the first woman to cross the Atlantic in an airplane (1928); Katherine Graham, the first female Fortune 500 CEO (1972); Sandra Day O’Connor, the first woman on the Supreme Court (1981); astronaut Sally Ride, the first American woman in space (1983); Aretha Franklin, the first woman elected to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (1987); Madeleine Albright, the first female secretary of state (1997); Dr. Condoleezza Rice, the first woman to serve as national security advisor (2001) and the first female Black secretary of state (2005); and Kamala Harris, the first female, Black, South Asian Vice President of the U.S. (2021).

Agency firsts include Dr. Catherine Woteki, who served as the first Under Secretary for Food Safety (male or female). Dr. Woteki was preceded by Carol Tucker Foreman, who served in the job’s prior form of Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Food and Consumer Services.

Many federal agencies, schools and organizations will observe Women’s History Month in March and celebrate the many achievements of women in every field, from science and the arts to religion and politics.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination against its customers, employees, and applicants for employment on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity, religion, reprisal, and where applicable, political beliefs, marital status, familial or parental status, sexual orientation, or all or part of an individual’s income is derived from any public assistance program, or protected genetic information in employment or in any program or activity conducted or funded by the Department. (Not all prohibited bases will apply to all programs and/or employment activities.)

FSIS employees and applicants for employment wishing to file an Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) complaint must first contact an EEO Counselor by calling (301) 504-7755 or 1-800-269-6912, or writing to the FSIS Civil Rights Division at FSIS Civil Rights Staff at USDA/FSIS/OA, 4700 River Road, Suite 1B-01D, Mail Stop 5261, Riverdale, MD 20737. Contact must be made with an FSIS EEO Counselor within 45 calendar days of the date of the matter alleged to be discriminatory or, in the case of a personnel action, within 45 calendar days of the effective date of the personnel action.