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Remarks as Prepared for Delivery: Agriculture Secretary Vilsack Presents Obama Administration's Priorities to Improve National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs

At the National Press Club – February 23, 2010

WASHINGTON, Feb. 23, 2010 – Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack today spoke at a National Press Club luncheon to highlight the Obama Administration's priorities for the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act and to advocate for the rapid passage of a strong reauthorization bill to improve the health and nutrition of our nation's children.

Below are Secretary Vilsack's remarks as prepared for delivery:

“When Americans think of the United States Department of Agriculture, they understandably think about the millions of farmers and ranchers who produce our food, feed, fiber, and fuel - the most productive in the world. Today I would like to draw your attention to a different group of Americans directly impacted by the work of USDA - the millions of our children who are fed through our child nutrition programs.

“At the beginning of the 20th century, school districts and community organizations began providing meals to ensure that school children wouldn't sit hungry in our nation's classrooms. The federal government joined the effort in the 1930's, providing excess commodities to schools. But the leaner years of the Second World War led to a drop in available commodities – and resulted in fewer students being served. Immediately after the War, our leaders understood the importance of investing in good nutrition to ensure that the country would never want for healthy, strong, young people to serve in uniform. And so, in 1946, President Harry Truman signed the National School Lunch Act, declaring that - “in the long view, no nation is healthier than its children.”

“President Obama and I share that belief. But the stark reality is that today we face a public health crisis of high child obesity rates across the country. Thankfully, we have First Lady Michelle Obama leading the Administration's efforts on this issue. Her *Let's Move!* initiative is focused on raising a generation of kids to be healthy adults. The campaign will give parents the support they need to keep their children healthy, help our kids to be more physically active, and make healthy, affordable food available in every part of our country. And the proposal I will speak about today forms the legislative centerpiece of the First Lady's campaign and the Administration's effort to ensure the health of our youngsters.

“More than 60 years since Harry Truman created the National School Lunch Program, our efforts to provide children with healthy meals have grown so that today, in schools across America,

over 31 million children will receive school lunch with the help of USDA. The success of school lunches inspired the creation of the school breakfast program that feeds over 11 million children daily; the Women, Infants, and Children Program, which serves more than 9 million pregnant and postpartum women and young children, including half of the infants in the United States; and a child care feeding program that provides nutritious snacks to another 3.2 million children. In total, working in concert with our K-12 partners and State and local agencies, USDA serves America's children more than 9 billion meals each year.

“Last August I visited a school and orphanage in Kenya to highlight the McGovern -Dole school feeding program that gives meals to school children living in developing nations. As I dished out a ladle of sorghum and rice I asked the students what they liked best about school. To a child they responded, "I like school because it is where I get fed." In Kenya many children do not get enough to eat. In America we face a dual challenge - children who are hungry and children who are obese. It is that challenge and those children that bring me here today.

“You might be shocked to learn that in 2008, 16.7 million American children lived in households that had difficulty putting enough food on the table. And in over 500,000 households, children skipped meals or ate less than they needed because of a lack of resources. At the same time nearly one third of all children in America are obese or over-weight. This is an epidemic.

“At USDA, we are working hard towards achieving the aggressive goal of eliminating childhood hunger in America by 2015. And we want to meet the ambitious target set by First Lady Michelle Obama: to solve the problem of childhood obesity in a generation. It is vitally important that we focus our energies and resources on solving both of these challenges.

“What is the cost of hunger to America's children that drives us to call for its end by 2015? The answer is simple. Ask any teacher how students who fail to eat a healthy breakfast or lunch perform in class. Hungry kids don't learn as well. In fact, the damage extends beyond the hungry children. If those children are not able to perform to their fullest potential, they will not be able to challenge the other students to extend themselves. If we want and need our children fully prepared for a competitive world and global economy we cannot afford for them to be hungry.

“What is the cost of the obesity epidemic that drew the attention of the First Lady and inspired the launch of her *Let's Move!* campaign? Children who start out life obese have greater struggles with their weight in later years. In fact, eighty percent of teenagers who are obese remain obese as adults. Obese adults risk chronic diseases including higher rates of diabetes, heart disease, certain cancers, asthma, and high blood pressure. The medical costs of obesity are enormous – approximately 10% of our nation's health care spending – and we cannot let them continue to grow at a time when we must reduce health care costs to remain competitive. Absenteeism and lost productivity at work are additional costs of obesity that our nation cannot afford.

“And, the argument for military preparedness that helped create the National School Lunch Program still applies today. A recent report showed that 75 percent of adults age 17-24 are not physically fit for military service. Because of the troubling trends, a coalition of retired generals and admirals has formed to advocate for a strong Child Nutrition Reauthorization bill. I thank them for their leadership and welcome their efforts to promote this important legislative initiative.

“So today, President Truman's belief that a healthy nation depends on healthy children remains as true as ever. We must respond as past generations have before us to improve child nutrition. Our children deserve more and our country's better and brighter future depends upon it. And with the reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Programs scheduled this year, now is the time to act boldly. Bold action with reauthorization must include the following elements:

- “We cannot rest while so many of our children struggle with access to food, but the federal government will never solve this challenge alone. In the last year, educators have seen the difference that a national “race to the top” in education has made. I am pleased to announce my support for a new competition to eliminate hunger by 2015. We’ll provide competitive grants to Governors, working with stakeholders statewide, so that states can act as laboratories for successful strategies. We’ll let them be creative in experimenting with models that match program delivery with evaluation, so that we can learn what works and what doesn’t. Possible steps will include policy modifications to existing nutrition programs, enhanced outreach efforts, improved coordination between nutrition assistance programs and family supportive services, and work with community and non-profit organizations. Grants would be provided to States with prior accomplishments and commitments to reducing hunger, applications that target communities with higher prevalence of child hunger, and projects that reflect collaboration with a wide range of partners. It is only with these sorts of coordinated efforts that we will achieve our ambitious and important goals.
- “In addition, we should offer grants to states and non-profit organizations to develop web-based or other systems to streamline the application process and expand efforts to enroll eligible students through direct certification. If a child already qualifies for other assistance programs there is no reason why their parent should have to fill out one more application to qualify for school breakfast or lunch. Bonus payments should be offered to states and school districts that effectively use direct certification to enroll children who currently qualify but who are not participating. In school districts with very high rates of students eligible for free and reduced price meals, the cost of paperwork and the risk of lost of application forms far outweigh any benefits. That is why I am also calling on Congress to provide USDA with the tools necessary to establish paperless application programs in these school districts. The object of all these changes should be to ensure – particularly in low-income communities where children are high risk for obesity – that every child gets the food they need to reach their highest potential. Through these reforms, I believe that we will be able to increase participation in the Child Nutrition programs by one million children in the next five years.
- “Increasing participation in School Breakfast must be part of reauthorization. On school days, almost two-thirds of children who participate in the lunch program do not participate in the school breakfast program. While school lunch is served in around 100,000 schools, the breakfast program is only available in 88,000. A healthy breakfast is critically important to educational achievement. No child should go without fueling up at the beginning of the day. This reauthorization is an opportunity to promote innovative approaches which have been shown to reduce stigma and promote participation in the program, like serving breakfast in the classroom. That is why I am calling on Congress to increase the reimbursement rate for school breakfasts and combine that support with USDA-purchased foods to give more children the option of a healthy breakfast. And I am calling on K-12 organizations and States to work with USDA to aggressively promote the breakfast option and to ensure that policies and practices are in place to reduce stigma.
- “But our efforts to combat hunger cannot end when the school bell rings on the last day of the school week or year. More children report going hungry during the summer – when we see a significant drop in participation in our programs. Working with local governments, nonprofit organizations and community groups, USDA must continue to help bridge the nutrition gap when school is out. We need to encourage more schools, community centers and organizations to provide meals during the summer, and to increase the number of days

they make meals available. One idea that I believe warrants attention is to expand the existing authority of the Child and Adult Care Food Program to provide after-school meals to at-risk kids to all 50 states. This successful program currently provides extra nutrition assistance to eligible children in 14 States – and there is no reason that steps shouldn't be taken to serve the 140,000 additional children who could be made eligible for this program or to find other approaches to providing them with nutrition assistance. I want to commend Congress for providing \$85 million in the in the fiscal year 2010 agriculture appropriations bill to test innovative methods to improve access to healthy foods during the summer. We will be moving forward in the near future with a series of demonstration pilots that use improved approaches to increase the number of sponsors and sites serving children nutritious snacks and meals after school, on weekends, and during the summer. This includes the use of backpack programs, new forms of congregate feeding, and new types of program delivery that model approaches used in the WIC and SNAP programs.

- “But no matter how many children we reach – we are doing them a disservice if we are not offering them meals that help them achieve at the highest level. Reauthorization must substantially improve the nutritional quality of the meals being served to our children and play a central role in the *Let's Move!* campaign's effort to solve childhood obesity in a generation. A recent Institute of Medicine study commissioned by USDA sounded an alarm about the nutritional value of school meals. The study concluded that our children are eating too much sugar, salt, and fats and too few fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low fat dairy products. This mix may help explain why one half of the calories consumed by children ages 6-11 in this country are "empty" calories. USDA is working as aggressively as possible to implement changes based on the Institute of Medicine recommendations to better align our meals with the Dietary Guidelines, but we also know that the improved foods will require increase costs for local schools. That is why I am calling on Congress to increase the reimbursement rate for the National School Lunch Program, to help schools purchase the whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and low fat and fat free dairy products that our children need to grow strong and healthy. Let me be clear -- our expectation is that school meals will improve as USDA issues new meal requirements that emphasize fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy products. Any increases in the reimbursement rate must be conditioned on the fact that the increases will pay for improved quality and improved nutrition, not just the status quo.
- “The Institute of Medicine report also showed that training, school equipment, and technical assistance would be necessary to implement these changes to the food we serve. Recognizing that many schools do not have the equipment in place to improve food selections, the reauthorization should build upon the investments in equipment made by the Recovery Act and include funding to improve school kitchens so they can provide meals that meet the Dietary Guidelines and offer fresh fruits and vegetables. At the same time, we should create a credentialing program for school food service directors, and support school food service providers with resources for the critical training they need to do their jobs.
- “The reauthorization effort should ensure that all foods served in schools are healthy and nutritious. A 2006 study showed that outside the cafeteria, children are three times more likely to be able to purchase cookies, cakes, pastries, and high fat salty snacks than fruits or vegetables. Foods served in vending machines and the à la carte line shouldn't undermine our efforts to enhance the health of the school environment. That is why we must have the capacity to set standards for all the foods served and sold in schools. It doesn't mean the end of vending machines in schools – just filling them with nutritious offerings to make a healthy choice the easy choice for our nation's children. Though many in the media have

portrayed this as an area of conflict, I will tell you that I have heard nothing but broad support for efforts to establish standards for food served throughout the school day. From food service professionals to the National PTA to the food industry, there is support for this new authority, and it must be a component of the reauthorization bill.

- “We also believe that every lunchroom ought to double as a classroom – and that schools should be challenged to make meals a learning experience. That is why it’s important for us to build on the step taken in the 2004 reauthorization bill to establish school wellness policies in every school by strengthening the requirement and raising the standard. Schools should work in consultation with parents to develop and implement a strong wellness policy centered on healthy eating, nutrition education and physical activity.
- “Making sure that parents and students have correct and complete nutritional information about foods being served in schools must be part of the reauthorization effort as well. With better information and simple assessments, parents will know what is available in their child’s cafeteria and can better assist their children in making the right nutritional choices. In addition to transparency, we also need to be smarter about how we serve food: Steps as simple as putting the fresh fruit in a more prominent place in the cafeteria can help kids improve their eating habits.
- “Strengthening the link between local farmers and school cafeterias must remain a priority for this legislation. Supporting farm-to-school programs will increase the amount of produce available to cafeterias and help to support local farmers by establishing regular, institutional buyers. Many schools are using farm-to-school programs as an important component of nutrition education. USDA has begun to deploy farm-to-school teams to help school districts understand how they can purchase and serve local foods. And I call on education leaders and our State and local partners to embrace farm-to-cafeteria programs and school garden programs to help strengthen the link between consumers and farmers.
- “Guaranteeing the integrity of the nutrition programs remains central to a credible reauthorization. We should fund periodic studies to eliminate erroneous payments in the meals programs. And support for new technology will help schools avoid inaccuracies in eligibility determinations, and maintain the confidence that our help is only provided to those who need it.

“While the focus of reauthorization must remain on access and improving quality, we understand the underlying responsibility we have to make sure the food our children eat is both nutritious and safe. That is why we’ve begun a complete review of our programs and protocols to enhance the safety of all food that is served to our children, and why this month we announced a series of reforms designed to ensure that the foods we procure are safe and of the highest quality. Parents expect as much and children deserve no less.

“Our efforts to combat hunger and obesity must also include encouraging our children to be more physically active. The USDA has partnered with the National Football League and Dairy Management Inc. to promote their program “Fuel Up to Play 60.” The program seeks to improve nutrition while also advocating for at least 60 minutes a day of physical activity for children.

“To highlight the nexus between nutrition and physical activity the USDA is joining with First Lady Michelle Obama in aggressively promoting the HealthierUS School Challenge, which recognizes schools that do an exceptional job promoting meal participation, meal quality, nutrition education, and physical activity. To highlight this program as the gold standard that we should expect of our schools, last fall we expanded the HealthierUS School Challenge to middle and high

schools. And in announcing the *Let's Move!* initiative, the First Lady called on us to double the number of participating schools in the next year and to reach 3,000 within the next three years. USDA is working with administering state agencies and a range of other partners, from professional sports leagues to media leaders and youth associations to promote the program and meet this goal. But we know we can't do it without your continued engagement.

“While Congress debates this reauthorization, one step that parents, teachers, principals, and school boards all across this country can take immediately is to help their school become a HealthierUS School. We are already seeing encouraging support and working to help communities reach this goal. An online tool kit designed to assist schools in assessing and improving their food offerings and an online calculator to determine the nutritional value of food sold outside of school meals are just two ways USDA is helping schools do a better job on improving nutrition. These steps build on a Menu Planner for Healthy School Meals we recently released to schools.

“We are committed to this program because we know that comprehensive solutions like the HealthierUS Challenge make a real difference. For example, a school nutrition policy developed by the Food Trust and implemented in elementary schools in Philadelphia included nutrition education, healthy food requirements, staff training, and family and community involvement. A study found that the effort reduced the incidence of childhood overweight in students by 50% over two years.

“But we know we can't do it alone. Today we have a strong chorus of voices calling for the changes I have outlined – and committed to these issues in their own communities. Thanks in no small part to the efforts of the advocates in this room, Americans are increasingly aware of the costs of hunger and obesity. Recent polling shows that 83% of Americans support expanding the Child Nutrition Act. At the grassroots level we see parents, teachers, doctors, coaches, and community leaders engaged in the battle. The nation's governors recently called on Congress to increase federal support for a reauthorization that includes the core components of our legislative request. And every day we see more and more businesses, non-profit organizations, school boards, advocacy groups and local governments engaged in the issue.

“In his first year in office, President Obama pulled us back from the brink of the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression and worked to lay a new foundation for economic growth. He identified three key strategies to building that lasting prosperity: innovation, investment, and education. All three strategies require the next generation to be the healthiest and best educated in our history. We will not succeed if of our children aren't learning as they should because they are hungry, and cannot achieve because they aren't healthy.

“After World War II, when our future was on the line, our leaders understood that the health of our nation – of our economy, our national security, and our communities – depends on the health of our children. We would do well to remember that lesson today, and to act on it once again.”

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