



OBAMA DHARMA WILL THE NEW PRESIDENT'S ADMINISTRATION USHER IN AN ERA OF HOPE AND CHANGE FOR ANIMALS, HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT?

By Mat Thomas and Tricia Barry

After nearly two years of lofty campaign promises, concerned citizens from across the ideological spectrum have invested high hopes in the Obama Administration and, in this Age of Interactivity, are making their voices heard in the public sphere. As promised by this Administration, the public expects to see change. What that change will look like is anyone's guess, but we at Farm Sanctuary hope to see this Administration move away from factory farming and toward a more healthy and sustainable plant-based agricultural system in this country.

Given the recent Congressional hearings to evaluate President Obama's selections for department heads, Farm Sanctuary has undertaken an evaluation of its own, pinpointing those departments that align with our vested interests in animal protection, environmental stewardship and public health. Perhaps the most telling actions that will define the new Administration's stance on the issues that matter to us are the people chosen to lead the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which houses the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Tom Vilsack – Secretary of Agriculture

As head of the USDA, Tom Vilsack will set policies affecting billions of animals raised and slaughtered for food every year in the U.S., and have the power to promote much-needed animal welfare, food security and environmental regulations. Based on his track record as the former governor of Iowa, one of the nation's largest agricultural states, the question of whether or not Vilsack will make America's food production system less cruel to animals, healthier for people and more ecologically sustainable has yet to be answered.

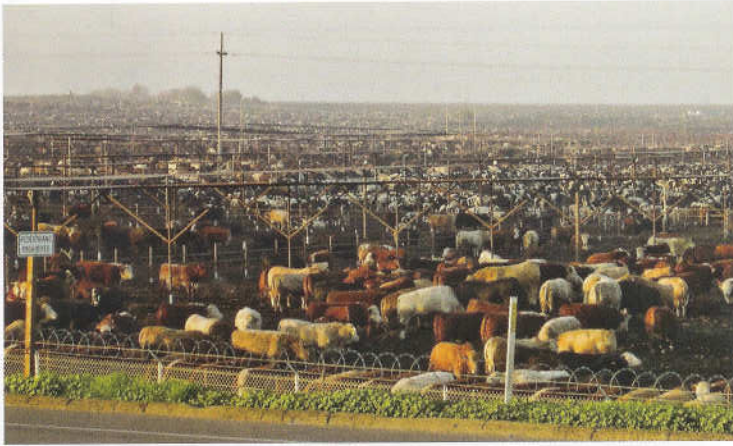
As governor, Vilsack often capitulated to the formidable financial forces of factory farming, leading (for example) to a proliferation of industrial hog farms in Iowa during his tenure.

We saw the results of this proliferation first-hand during the most ambitious rescue effort ever undertaken by Farm Sanctuary when we liberated more than 60 pigs from the levees surrounding Oakville, Iowa. These animals were the only survivors out of hundreds, if not thousands, who were abandoned and left for dead as the waters rose amidst massive hog farms and corn fields.

Vilsack has at times defied Big Agribusiness by supporting animal protection measures and vetoing a bill that would have prevented Iowa from making the state's environmental requirements for factory farms stronger than the federal government's. In addition, Vilsack (like Obama) favors shifting taxpayer-funded agricultural subsidies away from "corporate megafarms" toward independent farmers employing more sustainable methods, a move that could protect farm animals from extreme confinement and help preserve the environment.

The biggest challenge Vilsack faces is standing up to the corporate forces that dominate the USDA's agenda. Dr. T. Colin Campbell, Professor Emeritus of Nutritional Biochemistry at Cornell University and co-author of *The China Study: Diet, Weight Loss and Long-term Health*, spent nearly 20 years developing documents to inform government agricultural policy, mostly in association with the National Academy of Sciences. From his time engaging in this type of work, Dr. Campbell came to the conclusion that "Regretfully, federal food policy and government regulation is heavily biased in favor of corporate interests," and asserts in his book that he personally witnessed "a clear and ominous trend toward more, not less corporate intrusion into the process."

To become an effective reformer, therefore, Vilsack must challenge the USDA's business-as-usual approach of supporting grossly inhumane, unsafe and ecologically-destructive factory farming practices simply because they increase profit margins for agribusiness corporations. As such, Farm Sanctuary is committed to doing all we can to ensure that the new secretary of agriculture understands what is at stake if he continues to uphold a legacy of



How Vilsack will define “independent farmers” has yet to be determined. For instance, Harris Ranch in California is one of the largest cattle feedlots in the U.S. It is a vertically integrated corporation, but it is also family owned. Is this an independent farm by Vilsack’s standards?

catering to the interests of “the few” over those of “the many.”

Recently, Vilsack included a telling quote in a USDA press release: “We need to do a better job of responding to challenges, apologizing for mistakes when we make them, empowering our employees to make decisions and drive change, and emphasizing a transparent and inclusive style of governing.” We will see if Vilsack’s department achieves transparency and inclusiveness as the year progresses, but he’s starting out on a positive note regarding food policy. He has announced that the USDA is revoking a proposal developed by the previous Administration that would have cut more than \$3 million from a program that promotes the growth of healthy fruits and vegetables.

Lisa Jackson – Director of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

As the former head of New Jersey’s Department of Environmental Protection, Lisa Jackson fought to significantly cut carbon dioxide emissions, initiate a moratorium on the building of new coal plants, institute stricter air pollution standards, and expand wind and solar power production in the Garden State. However, she also drew criticism during her tenure as the state’s top environmental regulator for hiring a former industry lobbyist to enforce the same rules she was paid to defeat, outsourcing toxic clean-up jobs to the very industries that created the spills, and letting polluters get away with violating the law.

In stump speeches along the campaign trail, Obama stressed his plan to stringently regulate pollution from confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs) by imposing fines on those that do not comply with established state and federal standards, so we should expect EPA chief Jackson to carry out these orders on the president’s authority. Aside from the burning of fossil fuels for generating electricity, animal agriculture produces more greenhouse gasses than any other human activity. With curbing climate change near the top of Obama’s to-do list, Jackson must adamantly enforce existing laws and expand regulations as needed to bring CAFOs into line with the president’s goal of an 80 percent reduction in greenhouse gasses by 2050.

Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS)

Obama had originally tapped former Senate Democratic Majority Leader Tom Daschle to lead both the Department of Health and Human Services and the newly-created White House Office of Health Reform. However, Daschle’s recent decision to step down from these posts due to tax issues leaves this position

open as of the printing of this publication. Given that HHS oversees the FDA, Farm Sanctuary will be monitoring this new appointment closely and weigh in with our assessment in the spring issue of *Sanctuary*.

It is our hope that whomever is appointed to lead HHS and the FDA will formulate national nutritional policies based on independent scientific research, much of which overwhelmingly indicates that a plant-based diet best promotes overall health maintenance and disease prevention. Highlighting personal responsibility and preventive care through sensible food choices would be a cost-effective way to lower overall healthcare expenditures.

Working as One

Since its inception almost 23 years ago, Farm Sanctuary has advocated for the protection of farm animals acknowledging that the best way we can gain a deep and abiding respect for these animals is to practice a healthy and humane vegan diet. We know that people come to veganism in different ways, be it out of a growing respect for animals, their own health or the wellbeing of the planet. Oftentimes, all three issues play a role in individual transformation.

Through the years, we have expanded our actions from one-on-one grassroots outreach to include institutional reform efforts. Many of these efforts are aimed at chipping away at a system that has resisted change every step of the way. It is far more difficult to move a monolith than a person, but that challenge only makes us more determined.

This new Administration has acknowledged the need for citizen involvement and transparency in government. If those in power remain true to their word, we will have an opportunity to influence the way society views and treats animals on a scale that we have not seen before.

There will be times throughout the year when we will be asking you, our members, to take action on behalf of farm animals. Given the reformist bent of this Administration, we expect your individual voices to matter more than ever, and that is why it is more important than ever that you heed our calls for action. We cannot shift government policy without you, the people of the electorate. If you have not yet joined our online community, we invite you to do so by visiting farmsanctuary.org and signing up to receive our e-alerts. It is the best way to stay connected on the common issues that unite us.

We can collectively create a healthy and sustainable world *if* we learn to eat in a way that is consistent with humane values. And, *we must* let this be known throughout every facet of our democracy. We would be honored for you to join us in these efforts. After all, there are lives on the line.

