

TRANSCRIPT

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Transcript of Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns' remarks To the Natural Resources Conservation Services Agricultural Air Quality Task Force Meeting. March 1, 2006 - Washington D.C.

SEC. MIKE JOHANNNS: Thank you very much. That's nice of you. I tell this story all the time. I'd just been elected the governor of Nebraska, but I hadn't been sworn in. And I was asked to give a speech out in Kearney, Nebraska. And so my wife and I drove out there, Steph and I. And we got out there and had a very nice introduction just like what happened. As I'm making my way to the podium everybody stood up and applauded. And I said, You know that's really very nice of you, but I haven't done anything yet. Somebody in back yelled out, And when you do we won't be standing!

[Laughter.]

It's nice that I get this nice, warm welcome after doing this job a year.

Dairy farmers? Did I hear there's dairy farmers in the room?

VOICE: New York.

SEC. JOHANNNS: New York? Outstanding. Well, very good. Now if you're here, who's milking the cows?

VOICE: My brother.

SEC. JOHANNNS: Oh. Well, I do appreciate the opportunity to maybe stop by just for a few minutes this morning and offer a few thoughts. Before I begin I'd like to share with you a quote that we came across that I think you'll find very relevant to your work and very relevant to the meetings that you have.

In the address to Congress on the use of our natural resources, a former president said, and I'm quoting: "Men and nature must work hand in hand. The throwing out of balance of resources of nature throws out of balance also the lives of men." Unquote.

That was pretty good. Now that quote dates back to 1935, but it's probably especially true today. Now for those of you who are paying attention and doing the math in the audience here, thinking about 1935 and who that president was, that quote came from FDR.

That may seem strange for someone of my political allegiance, but when someone is right

in my judgment they're right.

And I believe that it is extremely important to protect our natural resources, and I know you share that same view.

I want you to know how important your work is, how much it is appreciated. Your work is important to the USDA, and it's also important to the entire nation. Improving air quality cannot wait; it's that important to us, to our children and to their children.

I said before that serving as the Secretary of Agriculture for me is my dream job. And I meant it. I'm so proud of the work that we do at the USDA. It touches the lives of so many citizens each and every day. I'm grateful to have dedicated employees at USDA, and I'm also enormously grateful to have talented advisers like yourselves. You assist us in guiding our progress.

When it comes to an issue as important as air quality, it is crucial for the USDA to receive balanced advice that takes into consideration the interests of our society, our environment, our producers, our industry, looks at all factors. In carrying out that charge it is the responsibility of all of us to try to do the best we can.

The guidance you have provided to me is incredible. Your recent activities related to the proposed national air quality standard for coarse particulate material (coughing)

VOICE: Must be the air quality.

[Laughter.]

SEC. JOHANNNS: I'm here to speak about air quality and especially with a cough that is almost stopping me here. So thank you for your patience.

Your input requesting the establishment of an inter-agency working group to address the definitions that exist for agricultural activities in the context of the Clean Air Act and other atmospheric regulatory measures is an excellent example --

Thank you. Cough drops. This might save me this morning.

As a result of the extensive research you did to prepare this detailed background, I'm now in a position to make an announcement that I will be requesting that just such a working group be formed including members from the USDA, the EPA and the Department of Interior.

This way we can be sure that agricultural activities are environmentally responsible without worrying about the ground rules or how the ground rules might change.

USDA has made some internal changes as a result of your efforts, and I'd like to detail those for you. NRCS now has seven full-time staff members that are dedicated to air quality issues and technological innovations. Nine ARS scientists have been hired or redirected toward air quality research as a result of input that you have given us from your task force. The funding for this research is approximately \$2.5 million.

And air quality has been added to the competitive National Research Initiative Program, by

our Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service. President Bush made it clear in his State of the Union address last month that the United States must not be complacent. We must continue to lead the world in human talent and in creativity or watch that lead be taken away from us.

He pledged that our nation would continue to seek innovative solutions to the challenges we all face, and he committed that we would have the tools that we need to do the job.

Many of you have worked tirelessly trying to raise awareness in the ag community of the importance of air quality issues. And again we appreciate that immensely.

Your work has provided timely input. It's helping the USDA identify and prioritize our research programs. I want you to know your message has been heard. It gives me great pleasure to announce USDA's National Research Initiative Air Quality Awards today.

USDA will make 12 awards to 11 American educational institutions for a total of \$5.3 million in the critical air quality research. The following highly deserving institutions have been awarded grants this year, and I'll list them: North Carolina State University, Texas A&M University, West Texas A&M, Virginia Institute and State University, University of Iowa, Washington State University, University of Chicago, University of California Davis, University of Illinois, University of Maryland, and the University of Minnesota.

I congratulate all of those institutions.

Our investment in these research initiatives is part of USDA's overall air quality program. It marks the third year of funding during which time we've given out a total of \$15.4 million. Most importantly, this money will be used to develop tools and practices that will help American producers maintain viable and economical production systems while effectively protecting the environment.

I believe that the projects that have been funded represent a very diverse portfolio of issues that address many of the high priority topics that this task force has brought to our attention.

Let me just say finally, I am confident that with your work and programs like the National Research Initiative Air Quality Program, USDA will be able to provide the sound science necessary to protect the environment while maintaining a viable agricultural production system.

So once again I thank you for your work. You are doing outstanding things for us, and on behalf of American agriculture thanks for your dedication. Thank you.

[Applause.]

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