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FOR MORE INFORMATION:
Jeff Cronin: 202-777-8370
Chris Waldrop: 202-797-8551

Next Ag Secretary Should Have Food Safety, Nutrition, and Environmental Focus, Groups Say

USDA Concerned With More Than Maximizing Commodity Production, According to Consumer Coalition

WASHINGTON—Much of the media speculation on who the next Secretary of Agriculture will be focuses on candidates lacking experience with food safety, nutrition, or environmental issues—issues which are at the heart of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s mission. Consumer advocates and other public interest groups are today [urging President-Elect Barack Obama](#) to appoint an individual who appreciates the diversity of programs administered by the \$95-billion-a-year department, as opposed to a candidate whose primary experience involves large-scale agricultural production.

“USDA’s food assistance programs are vital to helping millions of Americans survive in this time of high unemployment and high food prices,” the groups wrote. “Considering the contribution of the American diet to obesity, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, cancer, and other health problems, USDA must be more aggressive in promoting healthier diets.”

The groups further pointed out that the Government Accountability Office had recently identified food safety as one of [13 “urgent issues”](#) needing the attention of the next Administration. “USDA has a responsibility for assuring the safety of the nation’s meat, poultry, and processed egg supply and the Secretary must lead the way in addressing this urgent issue,” the groups wrote.

The groups, which included the [Consumer Federation of America](#), [the Center for Science in the Public Interest](#), [Consumers Union](#), [Safe Tables Our Priority](#), [Food & Water Watch](#), the [Center for Foodborne Illness Research & Prevention](#), the [Government Accountability Project](#), and the [Union of Concerned Scientists](#), also cited agriculture’s contribution to global climate change and urged that the next Secretary pay attention to soil and water conservation issues.

“President Lincoln, who established the USDA, referred to it as the ‘people’s department,’” said Carol Tucker-Foreman, Distinguished Fellow at Consumer Federation of America’s Food Policy Institute. “Unfortunately, USDA has lost its way. It is now dominated by a collection of special interests, far removed from the people it is supposed to serve. Given the pressing issues of hunger, food safety and the environment, we urge President-Elect Obama to honor Lincoln’s vision and choose a leader who can restore the mantle of ‘people’s department.’”

“The next agriculture secretary should think of himself or herself as a Secretary of Food, someone who wants to promote the consumption of safe and healthy diets—and diets that minimally harm the environment,” said CSPI executive director Michael F. Jacobson, a signatory of the letter. “Regrettably, current USDA policies fall far short of that goal.”

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