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USDA chief plans for Afghanistan trip

By Jerry Hagstrom | *CongressDaily* | January 8, 2010

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack is planning a trip to Afghanistan as USDA ramps up efforts to promote agricultural development in the country.

At a news conference Thursday with U.S. Agency for International Development Administrator Rajiv Shah and Richard Holbrooke, the special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Vilsack said agriculture development is the Obama administration's top nonmilitary priority in Afghanistan, with local officials leading the effort. He declined to give details on timing of the trip, but said it would be "soon."

"We will align our assistance and our help with the agricultural framework that has been recently announced by the Afghan government," Vilsack said.

Holbrooke emphasized that Afghanistan is dangerous for Vilsack and for civilians working there. "Civilians are not in the same environment as the military," he added. "They have to get out [of the protected zone] to do their work."

Vilsack said USDA has 54 people in Afghanistan, with 10 more on the way, and a budget of \$300 million per year. Many of them are paired with Afghan Agriculture Ministry officials, while others are working on projects ranging from improving crop productivity and export systems to saving watersheds and planting trees, he added.

Holbrooke noted the Obama administration has shifted strategy from poppy eradication to agricultural development. One hectare could generate \$2,500 in opium sales for an Afghan farmer, but the same land could bring \$3,000 to \$4,000 from apples and \$18,000 from table grapes, Vilsack said.

Vilsack, Shah and Holbrooke did not discuss whether USDA might be usurping USAID's traditional development role and undertaking the Afghan reconstruction effort at the expense of the USDA Foreign Agriculture Service's traditional mandate to sell U.S. products abroad.

FAS Administrator Michael Michener had been in charge of the U.S. effort, but after longtime agency officials criticized him for neglecting the agency's traditional work, he was reassigned in December to the U.S. embassy to the United Nations food agencies in Rome.



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Vilsack, Shah and Holbrooke emphasized that even though three civilian agencies -- State, USAID and USDA -- and the military are involved in the agriculture effort, they are taking a "one team, one mission" approach.

Holbrooke said USDA and USAID personnel in Afghanistan have been asked to keep their agency identification under wraps in part for that purpose. Both USDA and USAID leaders report to Ambassador Tony Wayne, who is "the senior director of operations," Holbrooke said.

At a separate event Friday, Holbrooke told the [Women's Foreign Policy Group](#) that the Obama administration plans to begin removing troops from Afghanistan in July 2011 as part of "a responsible transition" and that agricultural development will be a key determinant in whether Afghanistan can handle its security on its own.



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