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2020 U.S. ELECTIONS: FOOD, FARMS, DEMOCRACY PLATFORM **Making the next U.S. Secretary of Agriculture an Election Issue —** **for all candidates and all voters**

In my June 14, 2019 blog on [Presidential Politics + Food & Farm Justice](#), I quoted journalist John Nichols extensively about how the appointment of a U.S. Secretary of Agriculture was, for Trump, “an afterthought” (see Nichols’s book on all Trump’s cabinet appointments, *Horsemen of the Trumpocalypse*). In fact Sonny Perdue was the last cabinet appointment that Trump made; not until March 2017 was Perdue’s name sent to the U.S. Senate for confirmation.

I shared this information with an Illinois farmer, who promptly replied (as I quoted in my Dec. 17, 2019 blog, [Presidential Politics: Update for food & farm activists](#)):

...Mr. Nichols and you are 100% right (in my opinion) about President Trump, his knowledge of the Dept of Ag, and Sonny Perdue. However, this has been nothing new with our Presidents in recent history. I am not a scholar (I just farm), but I think the last President to really talk about farm issues openly, and have something to say was John Kennedy. I believe the 1980 Presidential campaign was the last one to have substantial ag policy in the political party platforms (the Republican Party comes to mind). The Secretary of Ag has always been the last Cabinet post to be filled by our newly elected Presidents in recent history. I know it was for Obama. You don’t really expect ag to be considered more important than, say, the Secretary of State or the Attorney General? It is a position probably offered to a person to whom a political reward is in order, or loyalty is desired. What irks me is that when a political hack is confirmed, all the major ag groups like Farm Bureau or National Farmers Union rush to praise the new ag guy, only to be disappointed in the following months because the Sec. of Ag is the President’s Secretary, not the people’s secretary. I wonder how much of a voice we really have. By the way, didn’t Lincoln, who started the post, call the Ag Dept. “the people’s Dept.”?

—Wendel Lutz (June 23, 2019) — Illinois farmer, member of National Organization for Raw Materials

In the interests of getting a head start on the appointment of the next U.S. Secretary of Agriculture — the people’s Department — I have been asking my colleagues for suggestions of

- a short version of our larger food & farm agendas—the non-negotiables
- qualifications for the next USDA Secretary
- qualified people

I have compiled all the individual suggestions that I received into this platform. Thanks to my colleagues on these three U.S. food & farm listservs for their input (I have credited them fully on the listservs):

- COMFOOD (Tufts University) general all-purpose food systems
- Food Policy Networks — FPN (Johns Hopkins University) supports food policy councils (FPCs)
- Regeneration Midwest (12-state coalition organized by Organic Consumers Assn.)

Note that no vote tabulation was made on these suggestions. They do not represent any of the listservs as a whole and should not be interpreted as such.

A. FOOD & FARM AGENDA for the 21st century: Farmers + Eaters, Rural-Suburban-Urban Voters

These three agendas together provide a snapshot of (a) our collective 2020 needs in the context of (b) a long-term (50-year) perspective on feeding ALL U.S. people—including non-humans, including the land—and (c) a seven generations perspective of the global food system post-COVID pandemic.

1. [“If the Global Food and Farm System could Talk, what would it say?”](#) (April 4, 2020)

by Rich Schell, Illinois attorney on international food law

- Healthy, productive farmers & food workers
- Preserve & protect key logistics
- Create resilience and redundancy with local food
- Preserve free trade & free movement of people across international borders

2. [Visioning of United States Agricultural Systems for Sustainable Production](#)

Comments to USDA Office of Chief Scientist, per March 2, 2017 listening session
Submitted by 18 food & farm organizations + 20 individual food & farm practitioners

“Over the next 50 years, U.S. agriculture must shift to diverse, resilient, adaptive and regenerative systems that mimic nature, stimulate healthy soils, restore ecosystems, benefit human health, ensure human safety, sustain just and livable employment at all points in the supply chain, increase biodiversity, and build communities of practice, to ensure the vitality of human health and local economies.”

We envision agricultural systems that are:

- Accessible to all
- Regionally self-sufficient
- Healing people and the planet
- Fair
- Democratic

We recommend the USDA focus its research on:

- Nutrient density and diversity
- Soil regeneration
- Highly productive polycultures
- On-farm energy production
- Decision-making structures
- Educating the next generation of food producers

3. [Comments to Democratic National Committee on Food-and-Farm Policy](#) (July 2020)

Submitted by Family Farm Action, Friends of the Earth Action, HEAL Food Action, Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, Citizens Regeneration Lobby, Food & Water Action, Land Stewardship Action Fund, People's Action

"Specifically, our organizations endorse the recommendations from the DNC Council on the Environment and Climate Crisis as they relate to food systems...along with a few *italicized* additions."

B. QUALIFICATIONS FOR NEXT U.S. SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE

These items are mostly taken from the nominee recommendations and "seconds". Some "qualifications" are taken from more general comments about the nominating process, including from a recommendation to connect with Wisconsin Farmers Union and an email from a member of Obama's transition team.

- works on food/ag policy at state & federal levels; knows political process at the national level; wrote book (Political History of U.S. Farm Policy)
- certified organic farmer; organic certifier; founder of Institute of Agriculture & Trade Policy; member of Congress, serves on House Ag Committee
- deep understanding of organic regenerative agriculture, climate change, nutrition; promotes sustainable & organic ag
- speaks very intelligently on food & farm issues; plain spoken
- someone not named T. Vilsack or K. Merrigan
- someone like Fred Kirschenmann
- someone not connected to Organic Trade Assn. (organic industry lobby group)
- someone not a former governor of a state heavily influenced by agribusiness lobby
- someone not awarded a "biotechnology" honor
- someone who's not a political hack (gets job because of what they've done for new President or something of that sort)
- person of courage, conviction, and an outsider regarding Big Ag; courageous
- understands monetary policy, parity pricing, etc.

C. PROPOSED NOMINEES FOR NEXT U.S. SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE

Note: None of these nominees have been contacted for their possible interest in becoming the next USDA Secretary. Nor have any been rigorously vetted beyond confirmation that they all have track records in the U.S. food & farm justice movement.

- **Mark Ritchie** — founder of Institute of Agriculture & Trade Policy (Minnesota)
- **Thom Petersen** — Commissioner, Minnesota Department of Agriculture (appointed 2019)
- **Jon Tester** — U.S. Senator (Montana); farmer
- **Chellie Pingree** — U.S. Rep. (Maine); farmer; local foods proponent
- **Tom Asbridge** — cattle rancher (North Dakota); former Exec. Director, American Agriculture Movement (founded in 1977); understands monetary policy, parity pricing
- **Other recommendation?**