

# Iowa Ex-Governor Picked for Agriculture Secretary

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CHICAGO — President-elect [Barack Obama](#) has selected former Gov. [Tom Vilsack](#) of [Iowa](#) to serve as his agriculture secretary, according to officials familiar with the decision, and will make the announcement on Wednesday as he works to round out his remaining cabinet nominations.

Mr. Vilsack, who briefly sought the Democratic presidential nomination in the 2008 race after serving two terms as governor, is a strong proponent of renewable energy and developing the nation's alternative fuel industry. He will be joined at a news conference here by Senator [Ken Salazar](#), Democrat of Colorado, who will be nominated as interior secretary.

Mr. Vilsack's nomination comes at a time of extraordinary tumult for the American agricultural industry, which not only has been battered by the recession, but is also increasingly entangled in the contentious debate over energy policy. The Agriculture Department is also contending with a sharp increase in the demand for food assistance in the wake of the economic turmoil.

Both Mr. Obama and Mr. Vilsack are regarded as staunch advocates of ethanol and other bio-fuels as a way to reduce the nation's reliance on foreign oil. And Mr. Obama and Democrats in Congress are working on a major economic [stimulus package](#), in which they intend to promote the creation of thousands of new jobs tied to "green energy" industries, including the production of solar and wind energy.

One of the first major decisions Mr. Obama and Mr. Vilsack may have to make is whether to grant the ethanol industry's requests for billions in federal aid in the stimulus bill, which Mr. Obama has said he hopes to sign into law quickly, perhaps on his first day in office.

"The big issue for him and any incoming secretary is going to be [biofuels](#), that's the sector that right now is in such a volatile position," said Ken Cook, president of the Environmental Working Group, a nonprofit group that is a leading critic of federal farm subsidies. American farmers, Mr. Cook said, are "hitched to both the food system and the energy system, both of which are oscillating."

Mr. Vilsack, 58, sought the presidential nomination for about three months, dropping out shortly after Mr. Obama entered the race. At the time, Mr. Vilsack criticized the campaign as a process that rewarded intense fund-raising over innovative ideas. He endorsed Senator [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) and served as a co-chairman of her campaign, often criticizing Mr. Obama as lacking experience for the job.

But during the general election, Mr. Vilsack energetically campaigned for Mr. Obama, promoting their common ideas on renewable energy and rural growth. Late last month, Mr. Vilsack told friends he did not believe he would be selected because he had not been

interviewed, but Democrats familiar with the process said the two men got along well during a recent meeting in Chicago.

Mr. Vilsack, like the president-elect, is a strong advocate of combating [global warming](#) and developing alternative sources of energy. He was the co-chairman of a task force last year on climate change for the [Council on Foreign Relations](#), which recommended phasing out subsidies for mature biofuels, including corn-based ethanol, as well as reducing tariffs on imported biofuels like Brazilian sugar ethanol.

“Let us build a 21st-century rural economy of cutting-edge companies and technologies that lead us to energy and food security,” Mr. Vilsack wrote in one of several op-ed articles he had published during the campaign. “Such an investment will revitalize rural America, re-establish our moral leadership on climate security and eliminate our addiction to foreign oil.”

Tom Buis, president of the National Farmers Union, said Tuesday evening that the biggest challenge facing the next agriculture secretary would be writing rules for the new [farm bill](#). Mr. Buis praised the selection of Mr. Vilsack, who as governor promoted the use of alternative energy as a means of revitalizing rural America.

“Governors understand what’s going on out there,” Mr. Buis said. “With the severe economic conditions in rural America, it’s good to have someone who understands the challenges we face.”

Mr. Vilsack, a native of Pittsburgh, moved to Iowa to live in the hometown of his college-sweetheart-turned-wife, Christie Vilsack. His career in politics was unexpectedly born in 1986 when a disgruntled resident of Mount Pleasant barged into a City Council meeting and killed the mayor.

Mr. Vilsack stepped in to serve as mayor. He later ran for the State Senate and in 1998 was elected governor in a campaign that even his closest friends did not believe he could win.

Mr. Vilsack, who has spent the fall semester as a political fellow at the Kennedy School of Government at [Harvard University](#), works as a lawyer in Des Moines. Four years ago, he was among those who were considered to be a running mate for Senator [John Kerry](#). Mr. Vilsack was not on the short list of candidates to join Mr. Obama’s ticket.

Experts said Mr. Vilsack’s experience as governor of a major corn-producing state makes him intimately familiar with many of the issues, but it also raises questions about whether he will be partial to growers of the crop that his state is known for.

“You can’t be a politician from Iowa and not be identified with a pro-corn, pro-ethanol stance,” said Mr. Cook, who leads the Environmental Working Group. “I just hope he will be more realistic and shoot straight with the public about what the prospects are of this in terms of energy independence.”