

## **USDA at 150: The Farm, Food, and Jobs Department**

### **By Val Dolcini**

One hundred and fifty years ago, in the midst of a great Civil War, President Lincoln signed legislation to establish a Department of Agriculture to “acquire and to diffuse among the people of the United States useful information on subjects connected with agriculture ... and to procure, propagate, and distribute among the people new and valuable seeds and plants.” Armed with these broad mandates, the “People’s Department,” as he called it, set about to serve American farmers and a mostly rural American landscape.

At that time, half of all Americans lived on farms, compared with about 2 percent today. The U.S. population in 1862 was about 31.4 million and today, that number has increased tenfold to almost 313 million people. Since its inception, the department has continued to fulfill Abraham Lincoln’s original vision to touch the lives of every American, every day in almost every way. Now, the modern USDA works in food science, agricultural research, nutrition assistance, bio-fuel production, economic and community development, natural resource conservation, international trade, credit, and a host of other issues.

By any measure, it’s been a very successful 150 years for USDA. Americans benefit from safe, abundant, and reasonably priced food. We produce 85% of what we consume and therefore enjoy food security. Our food, fuel and fiber industries provides employment for over 20 million Americans and agricultural exports continue to post significant trade surpluses which, in turn, have generated almost 1 million jobs alone.

Looking to the future, USDA must continue the legacy of contributing to the strength and health of the nation by becoming a more modern and effective service provider. We must tighten our belt, just as many Americans are doing with their household budgets. In the past few decades, American agriculture has become one of the most productive sectors of our economy, thanks to farmers, ranchers and growers adopting technology, reducing their debt, and effectively managing risk. USDA is adopting these same strategies in its Blueprint for Stronger Service, announced by Secretary Vilsack earlier this year. The Blueprint aims to build a modern and efficient service organization that is closely aligned with technological innovations - and better suited to respond to 21st century agricultural challenges.

The challenges ahead are many, both for USDA and American agriculture, but by focusing on a strong safety net for farmers and ranchers, supporting policies that encourage sustainable productivity, and by promoting vibrant markets that help feed consumers at home and abroad, the “People’s Department” will continue to help create

jobs, support working families, strengthen rural communities, and build on the success and productivity of the American farmer.

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