



The Ethicurean
Chew the right thing.

Checklist of USDA action items for change

1. Make the USDA once again the "people's department."

- Fill positions at the USDA with aggressive, capable, and hard-working reformers who will serve the interest of citizens before corporations.

2. Support diversified and decentralized local and regional food systems.

- Increase funding for the Rural Microenterprise Assistance Program in the economic stimulus package
- Increase funding for the the Value-Added Producers Grants Program in the economic stimulus package
- Boost funding for Section 122 of the Child Nutrition Act, which provides startup money for farm to cafeteria projects.

3. Start thinking of school food programs as an opportunity to invest in healthy kids, not as a garbage disposal for cheap commodities.

- In the Child Nutrition Act, support higher reimbursement rates for child nutrition programs; adjust the rate on a semiannual basis to better reflect food costs
- Commit to introducing an administration bill outlining USDA spending priorities for child nutrition programs.)

4. Give us clear information about where our food comes from and how it was produced.

- Revise the final Country of Origin Labeling rule to close loopholes on processed products and meat
- Reject the meat industry's petition to allow for carcass irradiation that will not be labeled on consumer meat products
- Immediately reinstate the Agricultural Chemical Usage Survey and associated annual reports
- Implement the new studies recommended in the 2008 Farm Bill to measure farmworkers' exposure to pesticides and investigate other pesticide safety issues

5. Start protecting us from food gone wrong, and GE crops gone wild.

- Fill chronic vacancies at the Food Safety Inspection Service
- Study how the patchwork of responsibility shared by the FDA and the USDA could be better streamlined, staffed, and funded

- Scrap and re-write the Bush Administration's proposed regulation of genetically engineered organisms under the Plant Protection Act (PPA)
- Revise the PPA regulations to ban the cultivation of pharmaceutical-producing crops outdoors

6. *Usher in a new era of conservation.*

- Make a public commitment to ramp up enforcement of Sodbuster and Swampbuster programs
- Urge states to implement the Farm Bill Sodsaver provision to deny crop insurance and disaster payments to producers who plow up native grasslands
- Instruct the Natural Resources Conservation Service to analyze and make public the data on use of EQIP by large, industrial livestock operations
- Direct states to implement a \$150,000 cap on EQIP contracts
- Encourage the President to include in his 2010 budget proposal annual funding of \$250,000 for the National Agricultural Library's Alternative Farming Systems Information Center

7. *Make a firm investment in non-biotech agricultural research – and make sure it stays in the public domain.*

- Redirect funding within the Agricultural Research Service so that organic gets its fair share of funding — at least 4% what industrial agriculture does.

8. *Help more people become farmers, and help the ones who've made that difficult choice succeed.*

- Protect the mandatory funding allocated for the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program in the 2008 Farm Bill
- Increase funding for the Risk Management Agency's Community Outreach program, which helps socially disadvantaged farmers
- Signal that major health care reform remains a top priority in 2009, especially for the self-employed and small businesses, including farmers and rural entrepreneurs

9. *Level the pasture for small farmers and ranchers*

- Start the rulemaking process under the Packers and Stockyards Act to end meat companies' use of captive supplies of animals to manipulate livestock prices in their favor
- Implement contract reform measures included in the Farm Bill to stop abusive practices between producers and meat companies
- Establish criteria for undue preference
- Implement the provisions from the Farm Bill that allow meat from state-inspected plants to cross state lines
- Support states that put small mobile abattoirs on the roads by making inspectors available for them
- Ensure that only active farmers and landlords who rent to active farmers can receive subsidy payments

- Ask for and support the reintroduction and adoption of legislation to close payment loopholes and establish a subsidy cap of \$250,000 per farm.

10. Realize where the market has failed and help us weather it.

- Support extra funding in the economic stimulus package for low-income food and nutrition programs
- Providing enough money for WIC in the stimulus package so that, combined with the Farm Bill money, the program will be fully funded and we won't have to rob Peter to pay Paula
- Increase funding for the direct and guaranteed loan programs
- Intervene to stabilize the milk price while a longer-term plan is worked out
- Help fund and launch a Farm for America program, underwriting public-service oriented positions in urban and rural agriculture



Ready, set, go change the food system: A checklist for evaluating the new USDA's first six months

The food system in this country has broken down like a rusty old tractor. Or more accurately, like a \$250,000, brontosaurus-sized, air-conditioned, computer-controlled, herbicide-misting machine. Calories may be cheap and abundant, but actual food is growing scarcer. The side effects can be seen in a populace growing ever healthier (and fatter); in our chemical-soaked soil, oceans, and drinking water; and in the shrinking pool of farmers and farmworkers, most of whom barely make a living. While everyone can identify infinite variations on these problems, there is no panacea that will solve them all.

When it comes to food policy, the quest to make progress on such a massive set of intertwined problems can result in tension between the big-picture visionaries — people like Alice Waters, Michael Pollan, and Eric Schlosser, whose gifts lie in their ability to synthesize the issues into a coherent whole — and the folks working inside the Beltway or their state capitols, who by necessity must focus on smaller pieces of the puzzle. The difference in approaches can result in name-calling: DC insiders are too compromising, too willing to settle for Big Ag's "crumbs," while the blue-sky thinkers are too impractical, too blind to the political reality of what it takes to eke out progress toward long-term change. But the two groups can (and occasionally do) complement each other well. The visionaries can shine a public spotlight on the areas that most need it, and the pragmatists can translate the groundswell of interest generated in a particular topic into political action.

In a much-emailed [article](#) last Sunday, Washington Post reporter Jane Black, after hobnobbing with the big-picture side during the inauguration festivities, concluded that the food movement lacks focus and an actionable message. (And also that green-apple gelee, however "homey," won't change the world. Agreed.) This isn't exactly a new critique, but it's an accurate one. Because food and farming touch many issue areas, the big-picture thinkers so often quoted in the press can't and shouldn't concentrate on only one aspect. But behind the scenes, the groups that are immersed in a single facet of the problem — whether it be food justice, farmworkers' rights, children's nutrition, organic farming, animal welfare, food safety, or conservation to name just a few — are right now laying the groundwork in the new Obama administration for a set of policies that, taken together, just might someday result in food that nourishes not only eaters but the farmers and the farmworkers who produce it, as well as American soil itself.

Their proposals aren't flashy or romantic, and the choir probably sounds more cacophonous than harmonious. But no one should say the food movement lacks for specifics. To the contrary, we have a bounty. The challenge is to see how these many small proposals could together possibly equal something much greater.

As a start, we embarked on a quest to find out which policies the new USDA, led by former Iowa governor Tom Vilsack, could reasonably put in place in its first six months to inspire real changes in

the food system. On Sunday, we asked 30-plus groups involved in the nuts and bolts of policymaking and a few individuals to tell us their top food and farming priorities for the agency's next months. More than half got back to us within our two-day window. We have filtered and synthesized the policy papers and informal emails we received into 10 big-picture directives supported by 30 specific, concrete actions. The majority fall under the domain of the USDA, while a few will require muscle from the Administration, but these are all proposals that the USDA can put its weight behind and support right now. They also happen to be in keeping with the [Rural Agenda](#) posted by the Obama Administration at Whitehouse.gov on January 20; sadly, neither food nor farming merited their own action agendas.

The first half of the list follows; the second will be posted on Monday morning. We hope you will tell us bluntly what's missing or what you think we got wrong in the comments section: we will integrate the best additions and criticisms into a new draft of the list that we intend to send to the USDA (and possibly turn into a Facebook petition).

We will also revisit this list of concrete, short-term proposals over each of the next six months to see where we stand. Think of it as a performance evaluation for the new USDA. Any progress made over this time will be incremental, to be sure, and it will frustrate the dreamers as much as it subsumes the wonks. But it's significant and important. These "crumbs," if successfully carried out, could someday add up to a pretty nourishing loaf.

A short version of the checklist follows the explanatory narrative.

Actions for the USDA's first 6 Months

1. Make the USDA once again the "people's department," as President Lincoln called the agency when he established it.

Move quickly to **fill appointed positions at the USDA with aggressive, capable, and hard-working reformers** ([like these](#)) who will serve the interests of citizens first. From the [Deputy Secretary and Under Secretary positions on down](#), putting the right people in these roles is one of the most important and consequential actions the Administration and Secretary Vilsack will undertake in the first 100 days. Barbara J. Masters, [who is apparently being considered to head the Food Safety and Inspection Services](#), is not such a person, seeing as how she works for Washington's largest Big Ag lobbying firm.

2. Start supporting diversified, decentralized food systems right now, and stop risking American lives by encouraging all our eggs to be put in one basket (or hamburger in one plant, peanuts in one processor...).

You have two immediate opportunities to direct federal support to small and local food producers.

Organizations consulted

The groups below have not endorsed this list, and people quoted in this document are not responsible for any of the post's content beyond their comments. We would like to thank these groups for their responses (and also those who preferred to remain anonymous):

[Beyond Pesticides](#)
[Center for Rural Affairs](#)
[Community Food Security Coalition](#)
[Congressional Hunger Center](#)
[Environmental Defense Fund](#)
[Food & Water Watch](#)
[Food Crisis Working Group](#)
[Food Democracy Now!](#)
[Food First](#)
[Greenhorns.net](#)
[Institute for Agriculture & Trade Policy](#)
[Land Stewardship Project](#)
[Bill Marler](#)
[National Farm to School Network](#)
[National Farmers Union](#)
[National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition](#)
[Organic Farming Research Foundation](#)
[Michael Pollan](#)
[Union of Concerned Scientists](#)

The first is by taking advantage of the economic stimulus package to support agriculture programs that will build strong new rural businesses and jobs. **Increase funding to two existing programs:** [The Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program \(PDF\)](#), which provides loans, training and technical assistance to rural businessfolk, and the [Value-Added Producers Grants Program](#), which builds local processing facilities and help farmers access high-value markets.

"Microenterprise accounts for most new jobs in many of the nation's most struggling rural counties," says Ferd Hoefner, policy director of the [National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition](#). "The recession and tighter credit markets are making it harder for rural small businesses to finance startup, expansion and even ongoing operation. These programs are a vehicle for rural economic recovery."

Your second opening is the [Child Nutrition Act](#), the federal legislation that establishes and sets the guidelines for our nation's school meals programs and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program. Every five years, Congress takes up this legislation. The current Child Nutrition Act is set to expire in September 2009. It's a prime opportunity to make our local systems stronger by boosting farm-to-institution relationships. Section 122 of the 2004 Child Nutrition Act authorized a farm-to-cafeteria program to cover start-up costs of these innovative programs, however, funding was never appropriated for this purpose. **Invest resources in Section 122 of the Child Nutrition Act and make the funding mandatory.** "The number of farm to school projects has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years, despite the lack of support and frequent resistance from Food and Nutrition Service," says Andy Fisher of the [Community Food Security Coalition](#). "Think about what could be done if USDA actively encouraged schools to support local farmers and ranchers." We'd love to see Secretary Vilsack **issue a policy directive to the Food and Nutrition Service to set goals for the procurement of locally grown food by school districts.**

3. Stop using the nation's kids as a garbage disposal.

Sasha and Malia Obama may be part of the first generation to have a shorter lifespan than their parents' if we don't act quickly to improve the food they consume. Prime opportunity: School food programs. Right now, the federal reimbursements for school meals are so woefully inadequate that food service directors have less than a dollar to spend on creating a healthy lunch. The USDA should [back higher reimbursement rates for school child nutrition programs in the Child Nutrition Act](#), and adjust the rate on a semiannual basis so as to better reflect food costs. And you can **commit to introducing an administration bill outlining USDA spending priorities for child nutrition programs.** "The best return on investment is healthy children," says Debra Eschmeyer of the [National Farm to School Network](#) (and an Ethicurean contributor).

4. Give us clear information about where our food comes from and how it was produced.

We like to know what we're eating, but recently we haven't been feeling too informed. Congress headed in the right direction last year by finally passing mandatory Country of Origin Labeling, but there are loopholes that need closing if our new president's message of transparency is going to follow us to the grocery store. You can **revise the final rule for COOL to close the loopholes** for some processed forms of covered foods (meat, poultry, fresh and frozen fruits and veggies, fish, and some nuts) and make meat labels more accurate. "The [COOL rule](#) put forward by USDA does not reflect the spirit and objectives of Congress," says Tom Buis, President of the [National Farmers Union](#). Revisit the rule before your window of opportunity expires on March 31.

You can also shine a light on our food choices by **rejecting an industry petition to allow the irradiation of meat carcasses without labeling the final cuts** that consumers eat. To be blunt, we aren't fans of the idea that we could be eating animal waste, even that whose pathogens have been rendered inert by ionizing radiation. It will make the slaughterhouses and processors even more careless, we think. We'd rather that you focused your energies on keeping contamination off our food in the first place. Thanks.

In the last two years, [as we've covered previously](#), the USDA has [scaled back and then suspended](#) the national Agricultural Chemical Usage Survey, the only reliable, public database of its kind outside of the state of California. **USDA should immediately reinstate the Agricultural Chemical Usage Survey and associated annual reports.** "The U.S. is now flying blind on pesticides," says Jay Feldman, Executive Director of [Beyond Pesticides](#). The data has been used by chemical groups, trade groups, public interest groups and government agencies to track pesticide use and safety. Without it, we have no idea how many pesticides are being used on crops in the U.S., nor how much, and thus can't track their effects on the surrounding communities.

Farmworkers are on the front lines of our toxic agricultural system. The 2008 Farm Bill contains a new program to study the relationship between cancer and farmworkers' exposure to pesticides; to develop technology for testing humans for pesticide poisoning; and to test sprayed fields for pesticide residues and degradation of the pesticides to determine how long before farmworkers can re-enter the fields safely. **Get these studies started:** collaborate with farmworker advocates, other agencies, and Congress to obtain the necessary money and contract with the National Cancer Institute for this research.

5. Start protecting us from food gone wrong, and GE crops gone wild.

Leaving food safety to the manufacturers hasn't worked. Most recently, more than 500 people have been sickened by contaminated peanut butter from a processing facility that knowingly sent out salmonella-tainted products. Melamine has been found in imported foods, there's [mercury in our corn syrup](#), and don't even get us started on the [E. coli recalls](#) or [Downergate](#). Since meat and poultry safety are under the USDA's domain, you must reverse the deregulation of the meat industry that's been slowly underway for years under various names and pilot projects. "We need a recommitment to continuous government inspection of meat and poultry – as the law requires," says Patty Lovera of [Food & Water Watch](#). That means, as a first step, **filling the chronic vacancies at the Food Safety Inspection Service** that keep meat and poultry inspectors from doing their jobs because they are spread too thin. But long term, we need to centralize government oversight of food safety. **A commission to study how the patchwork of responsibility shared (badly) by the FDA and the USDA could be better streamlined, staffed, and funded** would be a start.

And while contaminated food makes headlines now, we think deliberately manipulated foods could be the ones hurting people later. As evidenced by superweeds and new species-jumping diseases, even those of us with advanced science degrees often fail to predict the impact of genetic manipulation years down the road. In your first weeks, you should **scrap and re-write the Bush Administration's proposed regulation of genetically engineered organisms under the Plant Protection Act**. We already thought the regulations for genetically engineered foods were laughably toothless, but this is beyond the pale. The USDA regulates any GE plants that could cause harm, but the proposed regulation narrows the definition of "harm" so that only *extremely* harmful GE crops — for example, those that completely take over the environment in which they grow — would have to be regulated. "That could potentially allow the commercial use of GE plants that cause great harm, but not quite the devastation of the narrow definition," Doug Gurian-Sherman from the [Union of Concerned Scientists](#) told us. The regulation is pending review after the executive order on Bush's midnight madness. Time to send that Orwellian-sounding piece of legislation back to the drawing board.

Oh, and while you're at it: **In the new version of the regulations, ban the use of food crops grown outdoors for the production of pharmaceuticals.** The [history of contamination of food by genetically engineered crops](#) — even by regulated experimental field trials — strongly suggests that we'll end up with drugs in our corn flakes if pharma crops are grown outdoors.

6. Usher in a new era of conservation.

The Bush Administration has left us with smoldering wreckage for environmental regulations; agricultural lands have not escaped the flames. Technically, farmers who receive farm subsidies are prohibited from draining wetlands on their land and required to control erosion under Swampbuster and Sodbuster provisions of the Farm Bill. But guess what? That hasn't been enforced. "Despite the fact that we've had Sodbuster in place for over 20 years now, nearly one-third of the cropland in the U.S. continues to erode at unsustainable rates," says Britt Lundgren of the [Environmental Defense Fund](#). As a start, USDA should **make a public commitment to ramp up enforcement of Sodbuster and Swampbuster programs**. It should also **urge states to implement the Farm Bill Sodsaver provision to deny crop insurance and disaster payments to producers who plow up native grasslands**, or use rulemaking or administrative processes to achieve the same effect if states choose not to opt in.

President Obama has been clear on his desire to make existing government programs more streamlined and cost-effective, and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, which helps fund conservation practices on farms, is one area where limits are badly needed. This great program veered off course when USDA priorities shifted from funding the most cost-effective applications to instead funding applicants with the greatest pollution potential. [Research suggests](#) that a big share of funds are now going to industrial livestock operations. Is EQIP subsidizing the expansion of giant factory farms? Give us the data so we can know for sure. **Instruct the Natural Resources Conservation Service to analyze and make public the data on use of EQIP by large, industrial livestock operations** – both how much they receive and the practices the contracts fund – and help distribute those program funds more widely and fairly by **directing states to implement a \$150,000 cap on EQIP contracts**.

7. Make a firm investment in non-biotech agricultural research – and make sure it stays in the public domain.

Many in the good-food community wonder what our system would look like if we'd invested as much money in, say, traditional plant breeding and soil-building research and education as we have in genetic engineering. Show us a glimpse, please, by scaling up research programs for organic and other sustainable farming methods. Encourage the President to include in his 2010 budget proposal (due out this spring) **annual funding of \$250,000 for the National Agricultural Library's Alternative Farming Systems Information Center**, which will lead the dissemination of research on sustainable farming techniques.

[Despite what Pat Roberts may think of "non-production" farmers](#), there are a lot of hard-working organic farmers and grateful organic eaters who deserve to see organic get its fair share of USDA funding. You can help make this a reality by **redirecting funding within the Agricultural Research Service** so that organic gets the same share of funding as it enjoys of the food market. Right now, that's about 4%, which doesn't seem like a lot, but it's more than double the current expenditures.

8. Help more people become farmers, and help the ones who've made that difficult choice succeed.

Anyone who's seen the awesome trailer for [The Greenhorns](#) knows, there are a lot of young people who want to get into farming. We'd better hope so, since the average U.S. farmer is now over 50 and many are looking to retire. You can support beginning farmers and ranchers by **protecting the money allocated for the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program**, which was reauthorized in the 2008 Farm Bill and received mandatory funding for the first time ever. "Guarding against budgetary or appropriations measures that try to cut this mandatory funding will be key to successful implementation and usage of the program," says Adam Warthesen of the [Land Stewardship Project](#), which runs an invaluable [training program for new farmers](#) out of its Minnesota offices.

We're also thrilled to see [Secretary Vilsack's straight-out-of-the-gate commitment](#) to reversing our country's sad history of neglect of minority and disadvantaged farmers. You can take it one step further by **increasing funding for the Risk Management Agency's Community Outreach program**, which has funded hundreds of programs to help socially disadvantaged farmers become more economically viable. Recently their budget was cut by more than half. USDA should find another \$5 million annually to bring this program up to its 2007 levels.

Beyond the USDA, the Administration should quickly and decisively **signal that major health care reform remains a top priority in 2009**. The self-employed and small businesses, including farmers and rural entrepreneurs, desperately need access to affordable health insurance. No other action would have as positive and wide sweeping impact on family farm agriculture and rural economic vitality.

9. Level the pasture for small farmers and ranchers.

It's no secret that we've lost a whole lot of small and mid-sized farms and ranches in the past few decades, and it's not all because of market forces. Livestock markets are not competitive; they are biased against smaller and independent producers and towards giant, corporate-owned or -controlled operations. You have the authority to change this; **start the rulemaking process under the Packers and Stockyards Act to end meat companies' use of captive supplies of animals** to manipulate livestock prices in their favor. You can also move quickly to **implement contract reform measures** included in the Farm Bill that will restrict some of [the most abusive practices used in contract arrangements between producers and meat companies](#), and you should **establish criteria for undue preference** (preferably following the advice of the [National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition](#)). Yeah, that might sound wonky and confusing to everyone else, but we know you understand, USDA. Check out their recs [here](#).

While we're on the topic of meat, **implement the provisions from the Farm Bill that allow meat from state-inspected plants to cross state lines**. This was an important piece of the Farm Bill for which sustainable agriculture groups and small farmers across the country have been advocating for years — but implementation has stalled. It would start to address the many challenges they face in getting their products to consumers now that the slaughterhouse industry has consolidated into a few giant plants per state. That consolidation hasn't served food safety, worker safety, or the farmers well at all. So long term, the USDA should support states that [put small, mobile abattoirs](#) on the road, by **making inspectors available for them**.

A list of recommendations on "the big guys" wouldn't be complete without a mention of everyone's favorite lightning rod: the subsidy program. Happily, Vilsack last Monday [announced he was extending the comment period](#) for the 2008 Farm Bill Farm Program Payment Limitation and Payment Eligibility rulemaking process. He said he was "particularly interested in suggestions that would help the Department target payments to farmers who really need them and ensure that payments are not being provided to ineligible parties for future crop years." That's great news. The agency could save a lot of money and make the system more fair by **ensuring that only active farmers and landlords who rent to active farmers can receive payments**. You can also **ask for and support the reintroduction and adoption of Senators Dorgan and Grassley's legislation** to close payment loopholes and establish a subsidy cap of \$250,000 per farm. Especially in this time of massive budget deficits, is that too much to expect? As you can see, we have plenty of ideas for better ways that money can be spent.

10. Realize where the market has failed and help us weather it.

If there's one thing we learned from the Wall Street collapse, it's that the market does not always work as advertised. For poor consumers, food markets can often present a big middle finger: If you can't pay, you don't eat. Right now, more people than ever fall into that category. USDA should

throw its weight behind **extra funding in the economic stimulus package for low-income food and nutrition programs**, including [SNAP](#); the Women, Infants and Children ([WIC](#)) food assistance program; and our nation's many strapped food banks. WIC got the shaft in the Farm Bill; you can score a two-for-one by **providing enough money for WIC in the stimulus** — \$1 billion by some groups' estimates — so that, combined with the Farm Bill money, the program will be fully funded and we won't have to tap other longer-term programs (conservation, renewable energy, beginning farmers, etc.) to feed the hungry now.

Volatile markets are also spelling disaster for farmers across the country, who, last time we checked, can't individually control the weather or the production decisions of millions of other farmers across the globe. In other words, agricultural markets don't work the way they're supposed to: unlike an SUV manufacturing plant, farmers can't just turn off the cow if there's a milk glut or harvest early if it looks like a flood is on its way. So they're sitting and watching as once-high commodity prices tank, input costs rise, and credit becomes scarcer than a weed in a Roundup Ready soybean field. (Oh, wait... just kidding! It's much scarcer than that.) You can help by making credit and loans more easy to come by. Use the economic stimulus package **to increase funding for the direct and guaranteed loan programs**, the latter of which makes credit available to family farmers and ranchers who are unable to obtain commercial credit at reasonable rates.

The dairy situation is particularly dire — several producers in California [have committed suicide](#) in recent months as debt mounts and prices drop — so you must **intervene to stabilize the milk price while a longer-term plan is worked out**. Some groups propose that you buy surplus milk and funnel it to nutrition programs. We'll let you work out the specifics, but something needs to be done if we want to have a domestic dairy industry in 10 years.

Lastly, you could get a lot of bang for your buck by helping to **fund and launch a Farm for America program** (call it the Peas Corps!) as part of a larger Green Jobs program, underwriting public-service oriented positions in urban and rural agriculture that supply food banks, low-income neighborhoods, and senior centers with fresh produce.