

# US ag official urges Senate to create offsets system

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The agriculture secretary said the US needs a strong domestic offsets programme.

Tom Vilsack, secretary of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), told the Senate environment committee on Tuesday that a Senate bill should ensure that farmers, ranchers and forest landowners play a central role in a mandatory US carbon market.

“A viable carbon offsets market – one that rewards farmers, ranchers, and forest landowners for stewardship activities – has the potential to play a very important role in helping America wean itself from foreign oil,” he said in prepared remarks.

The agriculture secretary argued that a domestic offset programme would provide a “significant building block to revitalising rural America.”

The Senate environment committee today kicked off a marathon set of hearings on the recently-passed House energy and climate bill, the Waxman-Markey bill.

Tuesday's hearing included four members of President Barack Obama's cabinet: Vilsack, Energy Secretary Steven Chu, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator Lisa Jackson, and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar.

## **Agriculture's role**

Carving out a strong role for farmers and foresters in the Waxman-Markey bill proved crucial in getting the legislation passed on the floor of the House last month.

An 11th-hour agreement between House energy committee Chairman Henry Waxman and House agriculture committee Chairman Collin Peterson ensured the bill secured the votes needed for passage.

Among the last-minute additions to the bill was a provision that gave the USDA secretary – not the EPA administrator – oversight over agriculture and forestry offsets.

## **Collaboration**

Vilsack told the committee that in order to get offsets “to scale” and to ensure its integrity, collaboration between the USDA, EPA, Department of Energy and Department of Interior would be required.

“We look forward to partnering with our fellow agencies to work with the Senate in designing a credible offsets programme,” he said.

He also said the USDA already has a built-in capacity to ensure that farmers and foresters measure their carbon output accurately and can verify their reductions.

## **Working lands**

Vilsack argued that working lands in the US have “significant” potential to generate greenhouse

gas reductions.

He cited recent statistics from the EPA that found that domestic carbon sinks in forest and agricultural lands absorb more carbon dioxide that is released from all agricultural operations.

"It is difficult to see how greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere can be stabilised without policies that target emissions and carbon sequestration on agricultural and forestlands," he testified.

Senate Leader Harry Reid has set an 18 September deadline for all Senate committees to clear their components of a comprehensive energy and climate bill.

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