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## **Secretary Vilsack Launches USDA “StrikeForce” Initiative in Southeast Alaska**

### **USDA to Boost Rural Economic Growth and Opportunity in 16 states**

Palmer, Mar. 26, 2013 — Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack today announced the U.S. Department of Agriculture will launch its “StrikeForce” initiative in 10 additional areas, including Southeast Alaska. The primary goal of the StrikeForce initiative is to increase partnership with rural communities and leverage community resources in targeted, persistent poverty stricken communities. Vilsack noted that through the StrikeForce initiative, USDA will partner with local and state governments and community organizations on projects to promote economic development and job creation.

“During my travels across the country, I’ve heard mayors and community leaders say they have a hard time competing for USDA loan and grant programs. They have a plan to develop a new business or create jobs in their regions, but lack development capital and view our application and review processes as a barrier,” said Vilsack. “By increasing outreach and technical assistance to communities, we can serve as better partners and help communities leverage resources.”

State Executive Director for the Alaska Farm Service Agency Danny Consenstein fully supports StrikeForce, saying “I’m excited about continuing our collaboration with other USDA agencies to help build healthy, prosperous communities in Southeast. USDA has a broad range of programs to provide financing and technical assistance to help local communities create jobs and provide more food security by supporting more local food production.”

The StrikeForce initiative started as a pilot project in 2010 in selected regions in three states: Arkansas, Georgia and Mississippi. In 2011, it expanded to include areas in Colorado, New Mexico and Nevada. Today, Secretary Vilsack announced new efforts to bring the StrikeForce for rural growth and opportunity to selected regions of Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, North Carolina, North Dakota, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Utah and Virginia.

To identify persistent poverty counties, USDA identifies census tracts with over 20 percent poverty (according to the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey data). As areas of persistent poverty are identified, USDA staff work with state, local and community officials to increase awareness of USDA programs and help build program participation.

Secretary Vilsack also discussed how the StrikeForce initiative has already had an impact across the nation:

- In Arkansas, StrikeForce is tackling food insecurity and access to healthy food. USDA established a partnership with Heifer International through the East Arkansas Enterprise Community. This partnership is developing a sustainable food system in order to address existing food deserts in a nine-county area in the Mississippi Delta region.
- In Nevada, StrikeForce is improving access to farm programs in Indian Country. USDA has partnered with the Indian Nations Conservation Alliance, Nevada Department of Agriculture and local extension services to promote locally grown food on Tribal lands in Nevada.
- In Georgia, USDA is collaborating with Fort Valley State University to provide technical assistance to develop a cooperative business structure in the Georgia goat industry.
- In New Mexico, StrikeForce is helping more children get a healthy meal when school's out. USDA partnered with New Mexico Collaborative to End Hunger, Share Our Strength and Dairy Max to fund its first mobile Summer Food Service Program bus, delivering meals to 45,000 children each summer weekday at 700 partner sites.

Vilsack noted Farm Service Agency direct lending in StrikeForce areas saw an increase last year even as lending by the agency nationwide was down slightly.

“The StrikeForce Initiative is helping us direct additional resources to better serve producers in persistent poverty rural communities,” said Vilsack. “We are focusing on these identified high poverty regions to help improve the quality of life and to accelerate implementation of conservation practices on their land.”

Participants in the StrikeForce include the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Rural Development, Farm Service Agency, Food and Nutrition Service and other USDA offices and agencies.

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