By Tom Vilsack
Agriculture Secretary

We are approaching Veterans Day, a time to honor the men and women who have served this nation in uniform. Whether they are soldiers, sailors, Marines, airmen or coastguardsmen – our veterans were part of the finest military the world has ever known. Their selfless and courageous contributions over generations have helped Americans enjoy the freedom and liberty our founders imagined.

And USDA–through our work in rural America and on a host of other issues – has a strong connection with those who have served. Today, about 6.1 million veterans live in rural communities, a higher concentration than anywhere else in the country.

The connection is also about shared values. Farmers understand from generations of experience that you cannot continually take from the soil – but must also give back, nourish it, and make it stronger. Our men and women in uniform know that the same is true of a country.

USDA and the Obama administration have partnered with America's veterans on a host of challenges.

An alliance with more than 200 retired admirals and generals helped enact new legislation to provide healthier school lunches and breakfasts to our children and combat obesity. It means we'll help raise a healthier generation of young men and women who are ready to serve this country in the military–or to contribute in other ways.

We have worked to improve the quality of life and the economy in rural communities where so many of our veterans live. USDA alone has invested in rural businesses to help them create more than 250,000 jobs. This administration has invested in more than 500 projects to improve rural VA clinics serving nearly 3.3 million rural veterans and helped over 300,000 rural veterans and service members purchase a home or refinance their mortgage. Through the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, we have provided education benefits to over 215,000 veterans in rural areas.

And now, Congress has another opportunity to help put unemployed veterans back to work by passing the American Jobs Act. President Obama's Bill would offer a tax credit for firms that hire veterans, because veterans shouldn't have to fight for a job once they've come home from the fight overseas.

As we commemorate America's veterans and their achievements, we can never fully repay our debt of gratitude to the service members who were wounded or died in battle. We can, however, recognize and thank the more than 20 million living American veterans. And we must continue to support veterans once they have left service. They should be able to find a good job and live out the American dream. It is the least we can do for those who defended us.