

TRANSCRIPT

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Transcript of remarks by Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns at The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Global Earth Observation Event and Agribusiness Summit Washington D.C. - May 20, 2005

SEC. MIKE JOHANNNS: "Senator, first and foremost, thanks. That was very, very generous, and I appreciate it. We have a mutual admiration society. I met the senator, Senator Roberts [Senator Pat Roberts R-Kan.], here when I first came to Washington. I'd just been nominated, and I knew after I spent five minutes with him that we were going to hit it off very well.

"The senator has the right blend of common sense and experience and background to do a great job. I'll tell you one of the most exciting things though that I've done since I took this job is to go to your state Kansas. We had a great day together. We had a town hall meeting, then we went and talked to some media. The senator asked to go along, and I told somebody in my office that the senator knows that we'd done that, and he said, 'you know it's not fair that the two of you pick on the media at the same time.'

[Laughter.]

"So it is great to be here, and I want to say thanks for the kind introduction.

"If I might also recognize Admiral Lautenbacher. We also have some experience together. We worked on some issues relative to drought policy when I was the governor, and I was one of the co-leads for the Western Governors Association. The admiral was kind of a knight in shining armor, kind of showed up at a time when we needed some help here. And we worked together and collaborated and put out a document together that we released about a year ago. And I always appreciated that.

"And Admiral, it's good to be here. So thank you for the opportunity to visit with these folks.

"I'm going to talk a little bit about what you're doing today, offer some thoughts, and then I'm going to slip out to get to some meetings at the White House. I probably don't have to tell the people in this room how a successful global earth observation system can change lives, probably don't need to do that. And I probably don't need to tell you that that

system can have an impact on a worldwide basis. But the power of this idea is very definitely worth taking some time in being reminded of.

"Today I left my house knowing that I was going to need my umbrella. I knew that because the local meteorologist said, you're going to need the umbrella. I didn't even think about it. He said, rain. Rain's going to come. So I took the umbrella out and have used it a couple of times today.

"For me it was simple-- except in reality it really isn't that simple, is it? Accurate weather forecasting is a very, very complex science. Like so many scientific and technological advances, we've grown used to it. We assume its accuracy. And it's always been a free convenience, a normal part of our lives. So we don't even think about the advent of that technology and what a difference it has made.

"We don't think about how our lives are made easier by the seemingly simple fact of knowing ahead what the weather is going to be like, rain or shine. We don't think about how farmers and ranchers who provide us with our food every single day plan their days and their months based upon this relatively new science and technology.

"And most of us certainly don't think about where the technology will take us next. But there is a next step, and I would suggest it's a very big one. The next step is global earth observation. And it will revolutionize not only climate prediction, but it will revolutionize our understanding of this entire planet.

"Compared to only a few short decades ago when I was growing up on that dairy farm in Iowa our knowledge about the climate, about pollution, about the causes of drought, about flood wasn't very remarkable. Today we can say that we've made great advances, but I would suggest to you that we've only scratched the surface.

"The earth is an unbelievably complex place. Untold factors affect our environment and our ecosystem every day. We measure many of these factors. We do it through the 100,000 ground-based instruments across the globe, 100,000-- and the 50 environmental satellites that are orbiting our planet. But although those measuring stations gather a wealth of data on any particular area, they don't really talk to each other. And neither do many of the organizations and governments that are responsible for collecting that data.

"The straightforward truth is this. We cannot begin to understand the complexity of the worldwide systems if we do not have access to the data that is collected worldwide. In other words, we can't predict the next drought in Europe from a weather report in Cincinnati. If we are collecting data worldwide and if we want to understand worldwide implications and systems, we need a worldwide repository of that data.

"And that is exactly what we're going to build together. Together. Those who knew me when I was governor of Nebraska and who know me now as Secretary of Agriculture know that I talk frequently about the power of partnership. Partnerships are extremely vital to our success at the USDA because they allow us to do more, especially in these

times of less. They're force multipliers. Partnerships are even more important to a successful global earth observation system because by definition this system must include the resources of many nations and many independent partners within each nation.

"In other words, by definition it's not possible to do this alone and we cannot do it alone. That's why last February's agreement between no less than 61 nations and 40 international organizations was so huge. It means that there's a real understanding across the globe of the value of global earth observations and a commitment to make this system a reality.

"The benefits of a global earth observation system would reach every part of our lives. As remarkable as our ability to predict local weather would seem to someone living 100 years ago or even 50 that is how amazing the future of global earth observation will seem to us when we take advantage of it.

"Even now as we are just beginning to implement the system, we can predict tremendous benefit. A greater understanding of the earth will allow us to improve weather forecasting, reduce loss of life and property from disasters, protect and monitor our ocean resources, understand climate change and its implications, limit the water and energy resources, make ecological forecasts and better understand how environmental factors affect our health and our well-being, and sustain strong, sustainable agriculture while reducing land degradation.

"That last point of course is of special interest to me. Sustainable land use and the prevention of land degradation are absolutely vital to the health of agriculture, not just here in America but around this world. And a healthy ag sector means a healthy economy not to mention healthy people.

"Think about what a global earth observation system would mean to farmers and ranchers and for that matter the entire ag sector. For example, going back to my earlier example of global weather prediction, what if we could predict not just next day's or next week's weather but the next season or the year after that. Imagine the benefits as farmers could plan ahead more precisely, maximizing their resources and therefore their output. What if we could better understand and predict drought and flood seasons years in advance and adjust our plans and our responses accordingly?

"Today earth observations are used widely to assess production and resources conditions at a point in time, but there is a need to move beyond that snapshot. We used those measurements in a variety of ways. For example, one of the USDA's most productive interagency collaborations is its joint work with NASA on a series of earth science issues ranging from invasive species and air quality to water and to carbon management.

"That project depends on localized earth observations. But by combining those kinds of measurements from around the world, and then incorporating them into models that can be used where you get yield or status of resources as a consequence of future climate management and other factors, it can make an enormous step forward in our efforts to

ensure food security, marketplace competitiveness, production efficiency and improved risk management.

"In fact, let me make a prediction right now. These new observational and predictive abilities won't just change how we produce food and fiber; they will revolutionize it. The history of agriculture teaches us all we need to know about the benefits of new science and technology, and we need a better understanding of the world around us. There was a time farmers and ranchers provided their product only to the nearest town or village, and it describes early years on the farm. Then came the methods by which we moved products worldwide across this nation and all of a sudden agriculture changed: ocean liners, airplane travel, overnight travel, instantaneous communication.

"It might be a cliché, but the truth is that advances we could only have dreamed about just a few decades ago are now changing our world-- changing the way we produce, process and sell our ag products. The changes are occurring so lightning fast that it's easy to forget how revolutionary those changes are.

"Computers to plot land usage-- that's old news. GPS units in farm equipment that was yesterday's headlines. Buying and selling products on the Internet? We've been there and we've done that. The fact that these once miraculous technologies are becoming so commonplace is a sign of how completely they have changed our lives.

"But it is useful to remember how far they have allowed us to come today. Right now here in the United States our farmers and our ranchers are utilizing new science and new technology to become more productive than they have ever been before. This year American farmers produced nearly 12 billion bushels of corn, over 3 million bushels of soybeans, more than 2 million bushels of wheat, 23 million bales of cotton. They did all of this on 230 million acres of cropland.

"Now if you wanted to match that output with the same crop yields of the early 1970s, my college years, we would have had to plant over 50 million acres of corn, 40 million acres of soybeans, 20 million more acres of wheat and 9 million more acres of cotton. That's 122 million additional acres of farmland just to match this year's production.

"Why has productivity shot up like this in the last 30 years? Well, we know some things for certain. The weather-- it really hasn't changed. We go through cycles. The soil, it's still soil. It is we who have changed the equation with new equipment, new strains of crops and livestock and a greater understanding of the science of agriculture and a greater understanding of our earth.

"Now ladies and gentlemen, we have the opportunity to expand that understanding even further, and we cannot let this opportunity pass us by. And let's not limit the benefits of global earth observations to production increases. One of the remarkable changes occurring in agriculture in America today is that the federal government is working with farmers and ranchers to help them conserve natural resources on their own land.

"And that's a fairly new approach to conservation. It was not so long ago it seemed that those who made a living off the land were locked in a struggle with those who wanted to preserve natural resources. But we believe that those who depend on the land to make a living are the best stewards of the land. And today there is consensus that conservation and economic success don't have to be mutually exclusive.

"It is a vision of cooperative conservation working together and not against producers. That's a change in attitude. It's also a change buoyed by science. Global earth observations will bring to us a greater understanding of how agriculture affects the land and the environment, combined with our new cooperative approach to conservation, that new knowledge may very well offer tremendous opportunity. After all, what if farmers and ranchers can produce more, profit more, serve more all at once. Think about the benefits not just today but for our future generations.

"And it is not impossible, and it's not a crazy dream. We can make it happen. You can make it happen by continuing your efforts in this arena. And we can take it even a step further, I would suggest. Right now USDA Forest Service employees somewhere are working on ways to prevent catastrophic forest fires and infestations by pests and invasive species. In 2004, the first year under an important bill called the Healthy Forests Restoration Act, USDA and the Department of Interior together treated a record 4.2 million acres of land, an increase of 1.6 million acres over the previous year's total.

"From 2001 to 2004 federal land management agencies have treated hazardous fuels on 11 million acres of public lands, and we expect that number to be 15 million in 2005. That is remarkable progress, and I'm proud of our employees and am thankful for President Bush's Healthy Forests Initiative. It allows us to move forward.

"But the promise of global earth observations can take our efforts further. Ongoing monitoring will detect the progress of recovery from episodic and severe weather, overuse, pest infestation. Now predictive models will help pinpoint areas of concern, most importantly before it's too late. And a greater understanding that the causes of fire and infestation, which are after all, one part of our complex global system will yield to us new innovative ideas for combating these disasters at their very sources.

"That greater understanding of natural, non-natural disasters, of agriculture, of climate of our planet is really what this is all about. I truly believe that we have only scratched the surface when it comes to understanding the planet we occupy. It might not be literally true that a butterfly flapping its wings in New York can cause a typhoon on the other side of the world, but the idea is an accurate one. The earth's own systems are both complex and they are interconnected. They affect each other in millions of ways that quite honestly we don't fully understand.

"And let us be honest. The time when we completely understand these untold constantly changing relationships may be out there a long way. But we can take a huge step in the right direction by moving forward on a global earth observation system, and we will.

"The unprecedented cooperation and enthusiasm for this project across the world is a positive signal. It is a signal that people everywhere understand; we value the knowledge we will gain. It is a fact of history the more we understand about the world around us the more we can improve the world and our own lives, the more people we can feed, the more natural resources we can protect, the more diseases we can combat, the more lives we can save from disaster. These are not trivial goals; these are world-changing goals.

"Progress just doesn't happen by itself. It's the result of big ideas, hard work and cooperation. The system is a big idea, so now it's time for the hard work and it's time for the cooperation. We have the power to create this tremendous world-changing, life-changing tool. And I believe firmly we will. And in doing so we will create a better world for ourselves and our children and our grandchildren.

"Thank you everyone for your efforts. God bless you."

[Applause.]