

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2022

Remarks in Kankakee, Illinois

May 11, 2022

Hello, hello, hello. Is this one working? There you go. Please, sit down.

One of the things I want to put to rest—everybody looks at me and says, "Have you ever been on a farm?" And I remind them that that nobody—what nobody knows: I come from the State of Delaware; I represented Delaware for 36 years in the United States Senate before I became Vice President. Single largest industry in Delaware and the Delmarva—Delaware, Maryland, Virginia—Peninsula, that peninsula that goes down, is agriculture. It's a \$4 billion industry. Four billion dollars—that whole peninsula.

And we have more chickens than there are Americans. *[Laughter]* More broilers. And so, you know, I've been very, very—let me put it this way: If I didn't know something about farms, I'd have been a United States Senator for 6 years, not 36 years.

But every part of the country is different. Every part of the country is different.

But I—before I go on, I want to pay a little bit of a tribute to this guy right here. I'm going to embarrass you a little bit. This is the man who happens to be the son of the owners of this farm. And this guy is doing—you know, there's an old expression: God made man; then he made a few firefighters. Not a joke. Firefighters are incredible. Who else runs—who else is crazy enough to run into flames, you know?

But all kidding aside, what you're doing in terms of helping conservation as well out in Wyoming is astounding. It really is. I've been to—I don't want to make you stand. I'm sorry. *[Laughter]* The—but the whole point of my raising this is—and we're not going to be able to talk much about it today—but conservation is also pretty darn important and climate is pretty important.

I've been to every major fire but two this year, because FEMA is working again. We show up; we don't wait. We don't have to wonder. Governors only have to call me once.

And here's the deal: More timber, more land, more buildings, more territory has been burned to the ground this year than the entire State of New Jersey, from New York all the way down to Virginia. The entire State of New Jersey.

And so what this young man does and—is amazing what they do, trying to—and it relates to lack of water in most of the places I've flown over—those reservoirs that were 200 feet deep that are now 2 inches deep. Literally, not figuratively. So one of these days, I want to come back and talk to you all about conservation as well and climate.

But thank you for what you're doing, man. You're—I really mean it. Thank you.

Folks, I know it's hot in here, so I'm not going to talk more than an hour and a half. *[Laughter]* Look, I want to make a few I think are fairly important points. First of all, I want to thank Jeff for that introduction and you, Gina, for your hospitality you've extended today.

I joined Congresswoman Robin Kelly here—the real champion for working families and farmers—who represents this area, and I just do what she says. She sends a note to the White House, and I get it done. No, but she's a key player on infrastructure: getting high-speed internet, clean water to every person across this district.

And I know we—wanted to be here also was Dick Durbin and Tammy Duckworth, but they—and I mean they were going to come, but there's a vote today in the United States and they're unable to be here. They're one of—they're two of the most genuine, reliable people that I've ever worked with, and I've been doing this for a few days.

And I want to thank Tom Vilsack. Tom and I became friends when Tom was Governor in Iowa. We traveled the State. And Tom has forgotten more about farming than most people will ever learn. I'm sure this room knows as much, but the idea—Tom talks about how critically important that agriculture is to the United States in every single, solitary way.

But the real reason I'm here is to thank the American farmers—thank farmers. You feed America. You get us through—you got us through a pandemic. And you're literally the backbone of our country. It's not hyperbole. But you also feed the world. And we're seeing with Putin's war in Ukraine, you're like the backbone of freedom.

You know, I was at factory not long ago, a couple—8 days ago, down in Alabama. And they make Javelin missiles to help the Ukrainians stave off the Russians, beat them back in their aggression. And I pointed out that—the proof point that America is the arsenal of democracy. That's what they are. We always have been. We've been the arsenal of democracy.

And I stand here today to thank American farmers who are the—who are the breadbasket of democracy. You really are. You know, we talk about—you know, every investment banker could leave their job. If every farmer left, we'd all starve to death. You know, let's talk about what's important to us. Everybody—all these jobs are important.

But I—just think about it: Right now America is fighting on two fronts. At home, it's inflation and rising prices. Abroad, it's helping Ukrainians defend their democracy and feeding those who are left hungry around the world because Russian atrocities exist.

And Jeff and the American farmers understand Putin's war has cut off critical sources of food. Ukraine was the world's largest producer of wheat and corn and cooking oil—but wheat, the largest. For example, Ukraine says they have 20 million tons of grain in their silos right now—20 million tons. And guess what? If those tons don't get to market, an awful lot of people in Africa are going to starve to death because they are the sole—sole—supplier of a number of African countries. Somalia—I won't go through them all.

But the point is this: that because of what the Russians are doing in the Black Sea, Putin has warships—battleships preventing the access to Ukrainian ports to get this grain out, to get this wheat out.

The brutal war launched on Ukrainian soil has prevented Ukrainian farmers from planting next year's crop and next year's harvest. And they're not doing too damn—damn well in Russia either. Russia is the second largest producer.

And—but we're doing something about it. And our farmers are helping both—on both fronts, reducing the food—cost of—price of food at home and expanding production and feeding the world in need.

You know, I just toured Jeff's beautiful family farm, 800 acres of soybeans, corn, and wheat. We talked about farmers all across America, what they're experiencing today. In addition to Putin's war in Ukraine, it's been cold and wet this spring, like it is cold today. *[Laughter]* Yes. We waited for 90-degree weather until I showed up here.

But look, many farmers in the Midwest have been put behind the eight ball because of that. But it kept them from getting into their fields and planting crops. But as Jeff just shared, American farmers always find a way. They always feel something extra, a spark of patriotism.

And I'm not just—that's not hyperbole. A spark of patriotism. A sense of never giving up, of always finding a solution.

To all of our farmers, I want you to know: Your Congresswoman, me, the Secretary, my Cabinet—we have your back. Robin has your back. She's always looking at what's going on in the agricultural world.

For example, we're reducing the redtape so it's easier for farmers to conserve inputs and double crop. For folks at home who don't know what "double cropping" means: harvesting two different crops from the same field in the same year. And that's what Jeff does with wheat and soybeans, which America is a top producer of, soybeans.

And wheat will be harvested around July 4, if all goes well, God willing, and "the creek not rising," as my grandfather would say. But look, then you plant soybeans on the same acreage. And he'll tell you, double cropping comes with some real risks.

The growing season for wheat is short, and if the weather conditions aren't ideal or aren't at least good, or there are other disruptions, then the timing of everything is thrown off. But it's a risk we need to take. That's why my administration is looking at how to extend crop insurance coverage to give financial security to farmers like Jeff who practice double cropping.

Secondly, I want to also—farmers are worried about raising fertilizer—rising fertilizer costs and what is the content of the fertilizer. That's why, earlier this year, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced it would invest \$250 million to boost fertilizer production. Literally on the plane out here, on Air Force One, I turned to Tom, and I said: "Tom, double that. Make it \$500 million. It's so desperately needed. We can't take chances."

It's critical to get this done. Now, when we leave here today, I'm heading up to Chicago. You know where Tom's going? He's getting—he's heading to the airport—when we get to Air Force One—he's heading to Germany, to the G-7. That is all the democracies in Europe getting together and their agricultural teams getting together. North America, Europe, and Asia—they're all part of it. And what—to solve some really big problems.

They're going to see what actions we can take to increase fertilizer suppliers globally and identify how we can work together to prevent export restrictions on food and agricultural inputs and bring more global production to market, which will stabilize prices and bring more certainty to our farmers and keep people from dying of hunger.

You know, this builds in other ways as well. My administration are working to drive down the costs to farmers—and Tom mentioned it a little bit—and prices to consumers. To reduce gas prices last month, I was in Iowa—a biofuel processing plant—at a biofuel processing plant. And I announced an emergency waiver to allow E-15 gasoline to be sold across America during the summer. It's an extraordinary effort, but it had to be done for this summer.

E-15 uses more ethanol on crops grown here in Illinois and elsewhere around the country. And it can reduce the cost of a gallon of gasoline at the pump by 10 cents per gallon. Every little bit matters. I know it's a big deal. And Robin is a big supporter of this, and she's pushing it in the House as well.

Only four big companies, by the way, control more than half the markets for beef, pork, and poultry. Without meaningful competition, our farmers and ranchers have to pay whatever the four big retailers are saying they'll pay for their chickens, their hogs, and their cattle. These big companies can use their position as middlemen to overcharge grocery stores and, ultimately, families.

Just consider this: Fifty years ago, ranchers got over 60 cents on every dollar spent to produce the beef they raised. Today, they get 39 cents. Fifty years ago, hog farmers got 40 to 60 cents for each dollar the family spent raising that hog. Today, it's about 19 cents.

And as the big companies made massive profits, the prices you see at the grocery stores have gone up and the prices farmers receive has gone down. This reflects a market distorted by the lack of competition.

So last year, I signed—one of the first Executive orders I signed was the competition on a—to make competition more available and level the playing field. And though the American Rescue—through the American Rescue Plan, we're investing about \$1 billion to help smaller meat processors expand their capacity; give farmers, ranchers, and consumers more options and at better prices.

Look, I'm a capitalist. But capitalism without competition is not capitalism. It's exploitation. It's exploitation.

Folks, we can make sure that American agricultural exports will make up for the gap in Ukrainian supplies. In fact, during my first year in office, American agriculture exports shattered all previous records: \$177 billion last year alone. I remind people: My predecessor did not come close.

By traveling in our—you know, by—we can't—we have to keep investing in our farmers to reduce the costs, to reduce prices to consumers, and have the most productive, most efficient farmers in the world here in the United States. We've always combined generations of know-how with cutting-edge technology to feed us and the world.

And I'm going to keep fighting for family farmers like Jeff so they can do what they do best. I hope Congress is going to join me—I know Robin's going to fight like hell to have it happen—in working hard to invest in farmers like Jeff and feed America and the world. That's what we have to do.

Let me close with this: Look at the family farms like this one as a reminder of the bounty, beauty, and generosity of this Nation. I know this—and you're tired of hearing me say this for the last 2 years. It's never, ever—I always—I was on the Tibetan Plateau with Xi Jinping—I've traveled with him and spent more time with him than any other world leader has—in China.

And he said—he was talking about why America is a diminishing power. And I said: "Mr. President, it's never been a good bet to bet against the American people. No one has ever won betting against the American people."

And I said, "And by the way, you asked me"—he went on, and he said, "Can you define America for me?" Just me and a translator, and him and a translator. Simultaneous translation. By the way, I turned all my notes over to the State Department. [*Laughter*] It matters.

But you know, what happened was, he said, "Can you define America for me?" And this is the God's truth because—been quoted a thousand times now. I said, "Yes, one word: possibilities."

We're the only nation in the world—the only nation in the world—that has come out of every crisis stronger than we went in it, every single time, regardless of what it was. No other nation has done that. It's one of the reasons why in some places we're called the "ugly Americans." We think we can do anything. We know we can do anything. We know.

This Nation leads the world. We stand up for freedom. We're the United States of America. And when we are united, there's not a damn thing we can't do. That's not hyperbole. It's a fact. As

a student of history, it's a fact. There's nothing beyond our capacity when we work together. Nothing.

So I'm here to say: God bless our farmers—and I mean this sincerely—God protect our firefighters, and may God protect our troops.

Thank you for what you do. America owes you. They owe you big.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:15 p.m. at O'Connor Farms. In his remarks, he referred to Evan O'Connor, son of farm owners Jeff and Gina O'Connor; Sens. Richard J. Durbin and L. Tammy Duckworth; President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin of Russia; former President Donald J. Trump; and President Xi Jinping of China.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Kankakee, IL.

Locations: Kankakee, IL.

Names: Duckworth, L. Tammy; Durbin, Richard J.; Kelly, Robin L.; O'Connor, Jeff; O'Connor, Evan; O'Connor, Gina; O'Connor, Jeff; Putin, Vladimir Vladimirovich; Trump, Donald J.; Vilsack, Thomas J.; Xi Jinping.

Subjects: Agriculture : Domestic production, strengthening efforts; Agriculture : Food markets and prices; Agriculture : Food shortages due to conflict in Ukraine, mitigation efforts; Agriculture : Meat-processing industry, competition and pricing; Agriculture, Department of : Secretary; Business and industry : Competition and pricing, improvement efforts; China : President; Commerce, international : Group of Seven (G-7) nations; Communications : Broadband and wireless technologies; Diseases : Coronavirus, domestic prevention efforts; Economy, national : Inflation; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Energy : Ethanol and biofuels ; Energy : Gasoline, oil, and natural gas costs; Environment : Climate change; Environment : Conservation :: Promotion efforts; Environment : Drought; Illinois : President's visit; Infrastructure, national improvement efforts; Natural disasters : Wildfires, prevention and response efforts; Russia : Human rights issues; Russia : President; Russia : Ukraine, airstrikes and invasion; Ukraine : Russian airstrikes and invasion; Ukraine : U.S. assistance.

DCPD Number: DCPD202200381.