



U.S. agricultural trade is strong, but challenges remain says USDA secretary

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USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack provided insights on trade landscape for Virginia and U.S. producers at Virginia Governor's Conference on Agricultural Trade

By Ann Steensland, Lead, [Global Agricultural Productivity \(GAP\) Initiative](#)

Despite supply chain restrictions and the economic downturn created by efforts to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. exported \$135.72 billion (US) of American agricultural products in 2020, a slight increase from 2019.¹

While not generally credited as an agricultural powerhouse, **the Commonwealth of Virginia is the twelfth-largest agricultural exporter in the U.S.** and the largest on the East Coast. Agriculture and forestry are the first- and third-largest industries in the state, generating \$91 billion (US) in annual economic impact.²



On March 30, 2021, Virginia Governor Ralph Northam welcomed [USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack and other global leaders](#) to the thirteenth-annual **Virginia Governor's Conference on Agricultural Trade** for a discussion of the trade prospects for Virginia producers, and U.S. agriculture more broadly.



USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack speaks at the Virginia Governor's Conference on Agricultural Trade on March 30, 2021.

Secretary Vilsack complemented Virginia for having a diverse group of atypical trading partners, including Switzerland and Morocco. He said this demonstrates two of the most important aspects of cultivating and expanding agricultural trade: presence and relationships.

Being on the ground and spending time with leaders in current and potential trading partner countries has several benefits, said the secretary. It provides market intelligence, providing U.S. producers insights into what consumers in these countries want and need. Building relationships with leaders is essential for good trade agreements, and particularly important in times of crisis.

The secretary also emphasized that trade is about more than business.

“Agricultural trade isn't just about jobs and profits. It's about showcasing the American brand of agriculture - innovative, safe, and sustainable,” said Vilsack.

The secretary concluded his remarks with reflections on trade priorities for the U.S. He spoke about the need to address the trade deficit with the European Union and the United Kingdom. Vilsack said he will encourage European leaders to open their markets to U.S. products and adopt science- and rule-based regulations.

Europe and the U.S. have a common vision for agriculture, he noted, but different ways of achieving it.

Other priorities outlined by the secretary are the upcoming expiration of the Trade Promotion Authority and the potential for re-engaging the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), formerly known as the Trans-Pacific Partnership, or TPP.

The conference was co-hosted by Virginia's Office of the Governor, the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Virginia Farm Bureau Federation, the Port of Virginia, and the [Virginia Tech Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics](#).

[Virginia Tech College of Agriculture and Life Sciences](#) and the [Global Agricultural Productivity \(GAP\) Initiative of CALS Global](#) were Gold Sponsors of the event.

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