



AGRICULTURAL LABOR – IMMIGRATION REFORM

Issue:

U.S. agriculture faces a critical shortage of workers every year, as citizens are largely unwilling to engage in these physically demanding activities and guest-worker programs are unable to respond to the marketplace. This situation makes our farms and ranches less competitive with foreign farmers and less reliable for the American consumer. Securing a reliable and competent workforce for our nation's farms and ranches is essential to agriculture and the U.S. economy.

Background:

Farmers and ranchers have long experienced difficulty in obtaining workers who are willing and able to work on farms and in fields. Jobs in agriculture are physically demanding, conducted in all seasons and are often transitory. To most U.S. residents seeking employment, these conditions are not attractive. A number of studies document this fact, and farm worker representatives have acknowledged this reality in congressional testimony. Yet, for many prospective workers from other countries, these jobs present real economic opportunities.

The demand for foreign workers is heightened due not only to the lack of a domestic workforce, but also the reverse migration of workers from the U.S. to Mexico, historic levels of immigration enforcement and bipartisan congressional commitment to a credible work authorization system through mandatory E-Verify. Those factors, combined with a rigid and often inflexible H-2A program, demonstrate the need for a new approach.

Reforms to the immigration system can ensure that American agriculture has a legal, stable supply of workers, both in the short- and long-term, for all types of agriculture. This requires a legislative solution that deals with the current unauthorized and experienced agricultural workforce and ensures that future needs are met through a program that will admit a sufficient number of willing and able workers in a timely manner. Past legislative proposals (e.g., AgJOBS, HARVEST Act, BARN Act and other bills) have attempted to reform the H-2A program to ensure a future workforce in agriculture. However, it is apparent that those proposals are no longer viable to meet agriculture's needs.

Agriculture needs a program that functions efficiently for states like California, where migrant farm workers move from job to job without contracts, while still providing the security of a contractual relationship in areas where there is little migration. While usage of the H-2A program has increased enormously in the last few years, the current structure and framework are no guarantee for future success, Farm Bureau is seeking the new approach outlined above to ensure a legal, reliable, long-term workforce for all sectors of the industry.

Legislative Status:

AFBF continues to advocate for Congress to pass responsible legislative immigration reform that addresses border security, fixes the legal immigration system and provides farmers access to a legal and stable workforce.

AFBF Policy:

Only reform through legislation can solve the agricultural worker problem. In seeking a meaningful legislative solution to agriculture's worker shortage, AFBF believes that immigration reform must include the following two elements:

Agricultural Worker Program

An uncapped Agricultural Worker Visa Program (AWP) that is open to all segments of agriculture and is flexible enough to provide for the differing needs of farmers and ranchers. Such a program would allow workers to apply for positions "at-will" but also permit growers who wish to contract for such labor. It would be administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, would not impose burdensome requirements on growers and would also call for a fair, economic wage structure for workers.

Current Workforce

In order to minimize the impact on current economic activity, AFBF supports an adjustment of status for experienced but unauthorized agricultural workers who currently reside in the U.S.

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