

Communicating About Agricultural Labor Reform

INTRODUCTION

“The time is long overdue for our nation to have a comprehensive agricultural labor plan that works for all sectors of agriculture and across all regions of our nation.”

AFBF President Bob Stallman

Farm workers’ labor is needed to produce much of the food we enjoy and the crops that bring billions of dollars each year into our nation’s economy. A workable, affordable and efficient agricultural labor program has been a goal of Farm Bureau’s for more than a decade.

Without a legal, stable supply of labor, U.S. farmers are challenged by worker shortages, lost crops and the inability to produce crops at a price that can compete with imported food. The American public faces the loss of economic activity from U.S. food production, as well as the risk that more of their food will come from countries with fewer food safety rules.

Over the last decade, various immigration or agricultural labor reform proposals have been introduced in Congress. However, those proposals often fell short or created other problems for agriculture. Some would have allowed current farm workers to transition to legal status, without ensuring a future flow of farm workers. Some would have set up a program for new workers, without giving current workers an opportunity to participate. Some proposals were focused on solving just one part of the immigration reform puzzle, such as enforcement, when a comprehensive solution was needed. Meanwhile, the political environment made it all but impossible to pass even these inadequate measures.

Now, several agricultural groups, working together as the Agriculture Workforce Coalition, have outlined the elements of an agricultural labor plan that works for all of agriculture. Thanks to their efforts, meaningful reform and creation of a workable plan are possible. And members of Congress are showing the leadership needed to achieve that goal.

Legislation introduced in Congress in 2013, and the bipartisan support for the solutions proposed, represents the best chance in years to have an agricultural labor program that really works.

The Agriculture Workforce Coalition proposal includes most of Farm Bureau’s agricultural labor principles, such as:

- Creation of a new agricultural visa program that gives employers and employees the flexibility to agree on the employment terms that work for them.
- Stability via an agricultural visa that lasts at least three years and can be renewed.
- A way for farm workers who are in the U.S. illegally to apply for legal status as they continue working in agriculture.

- Enforcement and verification to ensure that agricultural visa holders are here legally and, in fact, working on farms.
- A requirement that visa holders return to their home countries when their visas expire, but allows employers to continue to recruit eligible workers.
- An alternative to, and elimination of, the H-2A temporary and seasonal visa program, which simply has not met agriculture's needs.
- A program that is available to all agricultural sectors, including dairy and livestock production.

The American Farm Bureau Federation hopes this information toolkit will help you answer questions about the agricultural labor proposals that Congress is considering this year.