

Agriculture Guestworkers: Meeting the Growing Needs of American Agriculture

Good morning, Chairman Labrador, Ranking member Lofgren, and Members of the Committee.

I appreciate the invitation to testify before you during today's Committee Hearing examining the labor needs of the agriculture industry throughout the United States.

As the son of immigrants, immigration is an issue close to my heart. As Representative to California's Twenty First Congressional District and a dairy farmer myself, I understand the critical role immigrants play in California's agriculture industry. The success of our agriculture industry depends on immigrants and without them the industry's economic viability, and our rural communities, will greatly suffer. I am hopeful that the work done in this subcommittee today will further our efforts to successfully update our nation's immigration policies.

As you know, farming in California is extremely labor intensive. Many immigrants come to this country to fill farmworker positions and do the hard work necessary to care for livestock and harvest produce in a timely manner. Their strenuous work makes it possible for families across America to put food on their tables.

However, our agriculture industry faces a serious shortage of immigrant agriculture workers and, the truth is, most Americans are unwilling to fill these positions. The shortcomings of the H-2A program have exacerbated this shortage. A major issue facing California's farms and ranches, is the program's inability to meet the needs of year-round farmers, including dairy farms and ag operations with multiple crops and harvests. We must repair the system, both for the current workforce and in order to ensure our agricultural communities have access to the workers they desperately need for years to come.

Hard-working immigrant farmworkers are not only the back-bone of our agriculture industry, but they and their families are the heart and soul of many rural communities. However, it is an unfortunate reality that the policies implemented by previous Administrations did little to improve our immigration system. Instead, executive orders and regulations trapped many workers on this side of the border, preventing them from returning to their families back in their home country, and imposing unfair ultimatums on those who contribute so much to our economy.

Further, we must reform the system to provide both employer and employee choice and flexibility. This can be achieved by ensuring employees have the freedom to move from employer to employer without a contractual commitment. In doing so, we can ensure our farmers and ranchers have access to the workforce they depend on. Without the hard work of immigrants, California's agriculture industry faces serious consequences, and risks inflicting consumers with high prices and decreasing our food security as a nation.

Reforming our immigration system, especially as it relates to our current and future workforce, is a complex undertaking and requires a comprehensive approach. For too long, extremes on either side of the aisle have discouraged real and meaningful discussion of immigration reform. However, this subcommittee's commitment to addressing the agriculture industry's labor crisis does not go unnoticed. I am hopeful that the work done by this committee will ultimately culminate in the implementation of fair and balanced immigration policies that ensure an adequate immigrant workforce, while continuing to combat illegal immigration.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to working with the committee, the Congress, and the administration, to craft a bipartisan solution to immigration reform that ensures our nation's safety and protects our agriculture communities and the economy.

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