

# AGRICULTURAL WORKFORCE COALITION

## Statement for the Record

Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship of the House Judiciary Committee

HEARING: IMMIGRANTS AS ESSENTIAL WORKERS DURING COVID-19

Wednesday, September 23, 2020

The Agricultural Workforce Coalition (AWC) appreciates the opportunity to submit this statement for the record regarding the Subcommittee hearing on the role of immigrants as essential workers during COVID-19. The AWC brings together organizations representing the diverse needs of agricultural employers across the country. AWC serves as the unified voice of agriculture in the effort to ensure that America's farmers, ranchers and growers have access to a stable and secure workforce.

The AWC has consistently highlighted the essential role that its workforce plays in the food security of this nation. For over a decade it has advocated for access to a legal status for its experienced workers and access to a viable and flexible legal temporary foreign worker program for its farmers. Seldom has the critical role of farmers and farmworkers to our nation's health and wellbeing been so visible as it has been these past seven months of the COVID 19 pandemic.

As with all employers whose industry was declared essential, farmers and food suppliers have had to deal with unprecedented changes in operations and learn how to respond to this unfamiliar threat to our nation's health. Of paramount concern is the safety and health of the workforce. Employers have undertaken best practices at the worksite and conducted education efforts on safe behavior outside of work that helps prevent community spread of the virus. We know we cannot 100 percent prevent spread, but as an industry are doing what we can at significant effort, disruption and cost. And we need help to safeguard our essential immigrant workers. Congressional action is needed to support our efforts to keep agricultural workers safe, such as through additional funding for PPE, equipment and training.

Recently, over 160 farm, food and agriculture organizations sent a letter to the White House Coronavirus Task Force calling for the federal government to take additional steps and devote new resources to help farmers, ranchers and growers across the country protect their employees from the novel coronavirus.

“[F]armers continue to do our best to provide a safe workspace for all employees, promoting safety on and off the farm. Across the agriculture sector, employers have instituted best practices

including social distancing, enhanced hygiene and sanitation procedures, employee training, and the use of personal protective equipment (PPE),” the letter states. “With the broad strain on PPE availability, testing, and other resources, however, we ask for your help as we continue to promote the health and safety of our farm employees and rural communities.”

Among the actions the AWC recommends that the Task Force take are:

- Allow for the use of alternative housing structures to facilitate greater social distancing and;
- Ensuring that COVID-19 testing resources are accessible to agricultural employers and their employees and that results are available in a timely fashion;
- Helping farmers offset the costs of COVID-19 mitigation expenses, while maintaining existing farm programs, by increasing Commodity Credit Corporation funds;
- Prioritize PPE and future vaccine distribution for the food and fiber supply chain;
- Leverage networks, in cooperation with states, counties, associations and community-based non-profits, to address the areas of community exposure risks to our workforce that are outside the occupational setting and ensure care is available and accessible to those who become ill, even in rural communities.

The letter notes that across many of these recommendations, expanding the pandemic response beyond the farm gate and into farming communities will be critical to ensuring the well-being of employees, their families and their neighbors. A copy of the letter is attached to this statement.

In addition, the AWC submitted comments on the National Academy of Sciences Draft Proposed COVID-19 Vaccine Prioritization Allocation Framework. In those comments, the AWC members stressed the essential nature of its workforce, the unique challenges presented by the nature of food supply work and strongly urged that agricultural workers be included in the first phase of any vaccine allocation. The AWC has made the same recommendations to the CDC and the White House Task Force.

Thank you for your leadership in this area and AWC looks forward to continuing to work with this Committee and others towards resolution of the essential agricultural labor issue.