House lawmakers to unveil ag labor bill

By Liz Crampton

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House lawmakers will introduce a comprehensive agriculture labor bill Wednesday that would provide a path to legalization for farm workers and expand the H-2A foreign guestworker program, according to a congressional aide.

The legislation, led by Zoe Lofgren (D-Calif.) and Dan Newhouse (R-Wash.), aims to bring together labor and agriculture groups that have long been at odds during attempts on Capitol Hill to reform the farm labor system. Mario Diaz-Balart (R-Fla.), another veteran on immigration issues, supports the measure too, the aide said, a sign that more Republicans could rally behind the measure.

The Farm Workforce Modernization Act would provide a pathway to legal status for undocumented immigrants who have already been working in the agriculture industry for at least two years and plan to continue in their jobs.

In a bid for support from conservative Republicans, the legislation would also establish a mandatory, nationwide E-Verify system for the agricultural sector.

To get agriculture groups on board, the bill would simplify the H-2A visa process, apply a cap to farm workers’ wages and increase funding for USDA housing programs for laborers. It would also try to fill a need for employers seeking year-round workers by creating a new, capped program, granting temporary three-year visas for those working in industries such as dairy, and allowing 40,000 additional green cards per year for agricultural workers.