



The Need for a Market Based Agricultural Worker Program
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With the mid-term elections over, policy makers setting the agenda for the next Congress should keep in mind one important fact: America's immigration system needs work. This is a statement that most Americans, and in particular most of America's farmers and ranchers, can heartily agree with. Inaction in Washington has brought us to this point and it will take action from our elected leaders to start us on the path to a solution.

For many in agriculture the biggest challenge they face today is finding the workers they need to run their farms and ranches. After all, it does not matter what Mother Nature throws at you if you do not have people to help pick crops or care for animals through good years and bad. This is a challenge faced by lettuce growers in California, dairy farmers in New York, nursery owners in North Carolina, citrus growers in Florida, and all farms from coast to coast.

It is an issue that impacts communities far beyond the farm, since each of the 2 million hired farm workers in the U.S. supports two to three other jobs in sales, processing, marketing and transportation.

This shortage of farm workers also bumps up against what is an open secret in agriculture today—that of those 2 million hired employees, between 60 and 70 percent are unauthorized to work in this country, though they show employers documents that appear genuine.

Even though unemployment is still a problem in many areas, farmers—often paying well above minimum wage—still have an extremely difficult time finding workers. The main factor is the seasonal and often transitory nature of the work. Most people do not want a job that lasts only six weeks; far fewer want to travel across the country from south to north each year following the harvest seasons.

In theory, the existing agricultural visa program could offer farmers a way to find workers. In reality, the program has become a bureaucratic nightmare that supplies less than four percent of the workers needed on America's farms. And the existing program is only for temporary and seasonal work. Farmers with year-round labor needs are shut out from using the program entirely.

To respond to this situation, a group of 70 or so organizations representing farmers, growers and agricultural employers came together to form the Agriculture Workforce Coalition (AWC), to speak with one voice and find a path forward on immigration reform. Through the ups-and-downs on this issue over the past two years, the AWC has stayed united in calling for a solution that deals both with the reality of our current agricultural workforce and with the need for a new, market-based agricultural worker program to address future labor needs.

This January, Congress can turn the page on this issue and start anew. The only way to permanently fix agriculture's labor shortage is through legislation. We hope that in the new Congress, the House and Senate, Republicans and Democrats, Congress and the Administration, can come together and agree on legislation to secure America's agricultural future.

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