



Statement for the Record

U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary

Hearing on "Immigrant Farmworkers are Essential to Feeding America"

July 21, 2021

The National Immigration Forum (the Forum) advocates for the value of immigrants and immigration to the nation. Founded in 1982, the Forum plays a leading role in the national debate about immigration, knitting together innovative alliances across diverse faith, law enforcement, veterans, and business constituencies in communities across the country. Leveraging our policy, advocacy, and communications expertise, the Forum works for comprehensive immigration reform, sound border security policies, balanced enforcement of immigration laws, and ensuring that new Americans have the opportunities, skills, and status to reach their full potential.

Introduction

The Forum appreciates the opportunity to provide its views on the essential role of immigrant farmworkers in America. Immigrant farmworkers have long served as pillars of the country's food supply chain and agricultural economic prosperity. They not only allow the United States to maintain a self-sufficient food supply,¹ but they also help our nation to be the largest exporter of food in the world.² In other words, immigrant farmworkers are essential to help bring food to our tables, maintain a buoyant agricultural industry, and strengthen the leading global competitiveness of the United States.

Immigrants make up as much as 78% U.S. farmworkers.³ Over one million U.S farmworkers are undocumented, which amounts to, according to one estimate, about 70% of the total farming workforce.⁴ Most undocumented immigrant farmworkers have lived in the U.S. for over a decade, and almost two-thirds of them are parents—many with U.S. citizen children. They are members of our congregations and schools, they put food on our tables, and they help our local economies succeed outside the farm gate by shopping at our stores and paying taxes.⁵

¹ See Areidy Beltran-Peña et al., Global Food Self-Sufficiency in the 21st Century Under Sustainable Intensification of Agriculture, *Environmental Research Letters*, 2020 (Available at <https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/ab9388>; Accessed on July 20, 2021).

² World Bank, World Integrated Trade Solutions, Food Exports by Country, 2018 (Available at https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/WLD/Year/2018/TradeFlow/Export/Partner/by-country/Product/16-24_FoodProd; Accessed on July 20, 2021).

³ National Immigration Forum, Infographic: Who Are American Farmworkers?, March 31, 2020. (Available at <https://immigrationforum.org/article/infographic-who-are-american-farmworkers/>; Accessed on July 20, 2021)

⁴ Farmworker Justice, Farm Workforce Modernization Act Introduced, November 13, 2019 (Available at <https://www.farmworkerjustice.org/blog-post/farmworker-justice-update-11-13-19/>; Accessed on July 20, 2021)

⁵ *Id.*

The United States is a nation of laws, and the country's agriculture industry should not be dependent on an undocumented workforce. However, farmers have extremely limited access to legal workers, and most undocumented farmworkers have no pathway to permanent status. The H-2A agricultural guest worker program is a cumbersome, outdated, and expensive process for farmers that cuts into already slim margins for farmers, and as such it provides less than 10% of the immigrant agriculture workforce.⁶ The program is limited to seasonal labor, meaning some crucial American farming industries, such as dairy and ranging, do not have any access to H-2A visas at all.⁷

For all the reasons mentioned above, the Forum urges Congress to pass immigration reforms that recognize the value of our immigrant farmworkers and provide a pathway to legal status to the millions of farmworkers who have lived and worked for years on U.S. farms. We would also support congressional action to reform the H-2A program to ensure the next generation of immigrant farmworkers will arrive with legal status. Immigrant farmworkers are playing crucial roles in the agriculture industry all across the country -- in every state, in every community. Without them, the United States would not be able to keep its population fed, its economy booming, and its predominance as a global power.

Immigrant Farmworkers Help Put Food on American Tables

Despite the Covid-19 pandemic and the record heat waves of recent weeks,⁸ immigrant farmworkers have continued to show up day after day to carry out their essential work. Immigrant farmworkers demonstrated, once again, their critical role in feeding the nation. Their commitment to bringing fresh fruits, vegetables, and other agricultural products to the tables of American consumers allows the United States to have food self-sufficiency and social stability.⁹

Immigrant Farmworkers Bring Economic Prosperity to the Country

Immigrant farmworkers are essential to the economy of the United States. Thanks to their labor, the farming industry in the United States generated \$136 billion in 2020.¹⁰ In addition, their hard work has allowed our country to be the largest exporter of food in the world for years. Last year, American food exports reached a record \$157 billion.¹¹ Immigrant farmworkers are the backbone of the industry, and without them, the sector's economic success would not be possible.

⁶ National Immigration Forum, Agriculture Sector: Immigrants are Indispensable to U.S. Workforce, October 25, 2017 (Available at <https://immigrationforum.org/article/agriculture-sector-immigrants-indispensable-u-s-workforce/>; Accessed on July 20, 2021).

⁷ USCIS, H-2A Temporary Agricultural Workers (Available at <https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/temporary-workers/h-2a-temporary-agricultural-workers>; Accessed on July 20, 2021).

⁸ We Are Home, ICYMI: We Are Home's Farm Worker Week of Action, July 12, 2021 (Available at <https://www.wearehome.us/news/icymi-we-are-homes-farm-worker-week-of-action>; Accessed on July 20, 2021).

⁹ Jennifer Clapp, Food self-sufficiency: Making sense of it, and when it makes sense, Food Policy, Volume 66, 2017 (Available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0306919216305851>; Accessed on July 20, 2021).

¹⁰ USDA, The Outlook for U.S. Agriculture – 2021: Building on Innovation: A Pathway to Resilience; 97th annual Agricultural Outlook Forum, February 2021 (Available at <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2021-meyer-speech.pdf>; Accessed on July 20, 2021).

¹¹ *Id.*

In the midst of an agricultural labor shortage,¹² our country needs immigrant farmworkers more than ever. Even when considering the vital contributions of the immigrant workforce, the American agriculture industry needs more workers. There simply are not enough U.S.-born workers who are willing or able to do the labor. In 2019, farms in Idaho had 1,000 open positions on offer at almost double the minimum wage. According to state workforce data, just five Americans applied for the positions. Farmworker shortages have resulted in rising food prices for consumers and as much as three billion dollars in missed GDP growth.¹³ Without immigrant farmworkers, fruit and vegetable farmers alone could lose as much as 9 billion dollars each year.

Immigrant Farmworkers are the Pillars of Food Self-Sufficiency

Immigrant farmworkers are the backbone of food self-sufficiency in the United States, and food self-sufficiency is a critical element of the overall national security.¹⁴ As President George W. Bush mentioned back in 2001, "[i]t is important for our nation to be able to grow foodstuffs to feed our people. Can you imagine a country that was unable to grow enough food to feed the people? It would be a nation that would be subject to international pressure. It would be a nation at risk. And so when we're talking about American agriculture, we're really talking about a national security issue."¹⁵

Conclusion

The undocumented farmworkers are considered both illegal and essential is an irony that cannot continue. As the Forum's President and CEO has noted, "if there was ever a time that we should be honoring and respecting the dignity, hard work, and commitment of farmworkers, it is now. Farmworkers are protecting the food security of the United States, they are giving back to our economy, and ultimately, they and their families are becoming American themselves."¹⁶

It is time for Congress to act. Farmworkers and growers, Democrats and Republicans, have come together to express support for needed reforms. The Forum believes that if our economy is to operate at full steam, we need new laws to reform the H-2A agricultural program and provide status and the possibility of citizenship to the essential immigrant farmworkers already living and working in the United States.

¹² The American Farm Bureau Federation, Another Year of Farm Labor Shortages, July 10, 2019 (Available at <https://www.fb.org/viewpoints/another-year-of-farm-labor-shortages>; Accessed on July 20, 2021).

¹³ Stephen G. Bronars, A Vanishing Breed: How the Decline in U.S. Farm Laborers Over the Last Decade Has Hurt the U.S. Economy and Slowed Production on American Farms, Partnership for a New American Economy, July 2015, at p. 2 (Available at http://research.newamericaneconomy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/PNAE_FarmLabor_August-3-3.pdf; Accessed on July 20, 2021).

¹⁴ Jennifer Clapp, Food self-sufficiency: Making sense of it, and when it makes sense, Food Policy, Volume 66, 2017 (Available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0306919216305851>; Accessed on July 20, 2021).

¹⁵ President George W. Bush, Remarks to the National Future Farmers of America Organization July 27, 2001 (Available at <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/07/20010727-2.html>; Accessed on July 20, 2021).

¹⁶ Ali Noorani, Who Are American Farmworkers? It is National Farmworker's Awareness Week in the U.S. and We Are Honoring Farmworkers, April 3, 2020 (Available at <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=534381590822197>; Accessed on July 20, 2021).