



Immigration Reform and American Agriculture

By Ben Schierer

President Obama and members of Congress from both political parties have recently expressed their desire to pursue comprehensive immigration reform. On March 19, Senators Charles Schumer and Lindsey Graham published an op-ed piece in the Washington Post outlining a framework for bipartisan immigration reform. Comprehensive reform is critical to American agriculture as growers across the nation continue to struggle finding the skilled workers they need to successfully run their farms and feed our country.

The proposed outline from Schumer and Graham is a reasonable, bipartisan proposal, and as the authors put it, “tough but fair.” It relies on three key components- strengthened commitments to enforcement on the border and in the workplace; a workable program for allowing temporary workers for American agriculture and other businesses that need a legal and reliable source of labor, and a viable solution for the millions of immigrants currently in the United States who are living and working outside of the rule of law.

All of these components are essential for effective reform, but the most important to American agricultural producers are the provisions for a practical and usable temporary guest worker program. This piece of the puzzle is often misunderstood and overlooked by the general public when considering the need for immigration reform.

In a recent survey of Communicating for America (CA) members, more than 90 percent of those working in agriculture agreed that a workable H-2A foreign guest worker program is essential in providing American farmers with a dependable, legal supply of labor. The current H-2A regulations are overly cumbersome, and put those farmers who play by the rules at a competitive disadvantage. Many of CA’s member farms have found the J-1 trainee and intern visa program to be a more practical alternative to the H-2A visa.

Despite unemployment figures at their highest levels in decades, labor shortages continue for many US farms. These producers have made every attempt to hire qualified American workers. Even in historically tough economic times, however, Americans are not willing or qualified to take many of these jobs, emphasizing the need for foreign workers in American agriculture. To the farmer whose number one concern is making certain that his crops are harvested, this is not an immigration issue, but rather a labor issue. There is simply not a sufficient domestic labor supply to meet the needs of American agriculture. As the economy continues to improve, the need for these temporary workers will only increase.

While there is bipartisan agreement that comprehensive immigration reform is crucial for agriculture as well as for America as a whole, the political climate in Washington will make consideration, much less passage, of immigration reform in the near future extremely difficult. The mere suggestion of the need to reform the current system, which clearly is not working, immediately elicits cries of “amnesty”. Unrealistically simplistic and impractical suggestions of mass deportation and anti-immigrant rhetoric have taken the place of meaningful dialog on how to fix a broken system; a system that has more than 12 million people living outside the rule of law; a system that leaves farmers and businesses to choose between breaking the law and meeting the labor needs of their operations; a system that has failed American agriculture, American business, the American people and those who aspire to come to our country legally. By and large, the American public is against illegal immigration and in support of legal immigration. Restoring the public’s confidence in our ability to secure our borders and control illegal immigration is essential, and the best way to do this is to implement a system for legal immigration that truly works. I hope that Congress has the will to do what’s right, and not what is politically easiest.

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