

Farm groups rally support for reform of immigration law

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By Christine Souza



Winegrape grower Kathy Mahoney of Napa talks to U.S. Agriculture Acting Deputy Secretary Michael Scuse about the “paperwork nightmare” involved in the existing H-2A agricultural immigration program. Photo/Christine Souza

With fields left unharvested and farmers adjusting cultural practices due to a lack of willing and able employees, agricultural organizations including the California Farm Bureau Federation are working alongside farmworker advocates, asking the House of Representatives to pass meaningful reform to the federal immigration system when Congress returns from its August recess.

During a roundtable discussion with U.S. Department of Agriculture Acting Deputy Secretary Michael Scuse in Sacramento last week, CFBF President Paul Wenger said it is time to “rally the troops” on the issue of immigration reform.

“There are folks who say, ‘If they don’t get it done this year, there’s always next year.’ No, there is no next year. This is it,” Wenger said. “It is time for folks to put their differences aside and get it done. It’s going to take phone calls from our members and talking to folks that they have supported for a lot of years saying, ‘This is it.’”

Scuse told the group he is optimistic that, ultimately, the nation will achieve some type of meaningful reform.

“The House of Representatives has elected to divide this up into four different bills and piecemeal it. If they can pass those bills so that they can go to conference and work out the differences, it may be workable,” Scuse said.

Wenger and Scuse were joined by representatives from other agricultural organizations as well as United Farm Workers President Arturo Rodriguez, to discuss prospects that the House will pass immigration-reform legislation this year.

"We are at a very critical state. There are 39 days left when Congress comes back into session between now and the end of the year, so that doesn't give us much time," Rodriguez said. "This industry doesn't survive if we keep putting this off. The time has come that we need to act as unified as we possibly can between labor and management to really let our voices be heard."

In June, the Senate passed S. 744, an immigration bill that contains an earned adjustment in status for current, experienced farmworkers and a program to ensure that farmers and ranchers continue to have access to a legal workforce as current agricultural employees move on to other jobs. S. 744 enjoyed wide support from farm groups, particularly the Agricultural Workforce Coalition, a nationwide group of agricultural organizations that collectively developed a set of principles that defined the agricultural immigration program contained in the bill.

The House has introduced multiple bills and is working on additional pieces of legislation that, if passed, would merge as one package to meet the Senate in conference committee.

Rich Hudgins, president and chief executive officer of the California Canning Peach Association, said cling peach growers in California are at the peak of harvest.

"To deliver the peaches that were picked yesterday, it took just over 5,000 workers. That 5,000 farmworkers turns into tens of thousands of jobs in the state, such as in the processing facilities in the Central Valley of California," Hudgins said. "But it is not a question of if your peaches are going to get picked by a foreign worker or not; it's just a question of whether that worker is going to be picking fruit in California, or picking fruit in China or Mexico or Chile or another country as we import more fruits and vegetables into this country."

Bill Mattos, president of the California Poultry Federation, said representatives understand the problems farmers face but that political issues may discourage them from approving immigration reform.

"Somehow, we have to get through the political ramifications here," Mattos said. "The reality is we have to get into the politics and make it happen."

Prior to his meeting with farm-group representatives in Sacramento, USDA official Scuse visited Napa to meet with Francis and Kathy Mahoney, owners of Carneros Wine Co. and past users of the existing H-2A guestworker program. Walking through a vineyard, Scuse heard from the Mahoneys how burdensome, costly and difficult the H-2A program is.

Kathy Mahoney, who handles the H-2A paperwork for the company, noted that the immigrant employees hired through the program "work really hard and want to be invited back again. We are very careful about making sure that we don't displace American workers."

This year, for the first time, the Mahoneys were forced to use a farm labor contractor to hire employees, after their insurance company said it would not cover anyone in California who uses the H-2A program. Francis Mahoney said the farm ended up in a "bidding war" with other farmers for the available employees.

"What happened to us in Solano County is we got in direct competition with the cherry harvest. We finally got into the vineyard in June and July and by then, it was too late. As a result, a lot of the crop is really small; we probably lost 50 tons," he said.

Scuse talked to the Mahoneys about the revised system included in the Senate immigration legislation.

"The way that the Senate legislation is written, USDA will be responsible for rulemaking, and Secretary Vilsack has been very engaged and he understands the importance of real reform," Scuse said. "There will be growing pains. I can't tell you that the minute the regulations are completed, you are going to go into your local (Farm Service Agency) office and it is going to be smooth sailing. This is new and uncharted waters for us at the FSA, but we're going to do everything that we can to make this as good of a program as we possibly can."

(Christine Souza is an assistant editor of Ag Alert. She may be contacted at csouza@cfbf.com.)

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