

## Commentary: Farmers, employees need immigration rules that work

Issue Date: [August 14, 2013](#)

By Val Dolcini

Earlier this year, the U.S. Senate passed a commonsense immigration reform measure in a strongly bipartisan fashion. This was an important step in the right direction—especially for producers, farmworkers and rural communities.

The historic legislation passed by the Senate provides a pathway to earned citizenship for the 11 million people who are in our country today without authorization. They will have to go to the back of the line, pay fines and settle taxes they owe our nation.

It would modernize the system that we use to bring skilled workers into the United States. And it would put in place the toughest border security plan that America has ever seen—building on steps that have reduced illegal border crossings to their lowest level in decades.



The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office found that the Senate bill would reduce the deficit during the next 20 years by nearly \$850 billion, and the Social Security Administration estimated that this immigration bill would add nearly \$300 billion to the Social Security system in the next decade.

This bill is also important for rural America. Recently, the White House economic team released a new report highlighting the positive economic benefits that commonsense immigration reform would provide for agriculture and rural communities.

The report highlights research showing that without a stable workforce, America's record agricultural productivity will decline in coming years. In California, for example, eliminating the immigrant labor force would cost from \$1.73 billion to \$3.12 billion in short-term production losses.

The Senate bill addresses this concern by taking much-needed steps to ensure a stable agricultural workforce, and a fair system for U.S. producers and farmworkers. In particular, it would give qualifying farmworkers an expedited path to earned citizenship, as long as they continue to work in agriculture. A new temporary-worker program would replace the current H-2A visa program over time and allow farmworkers a three-year visa to work year-round in any agricultural job.

This commonsense system wouldn't just prevent a decline in production—it would grow the economy. Research highlighted in the White House report projects that an expanded temporary-worker program would increase both production and exports across our agricultural sector.

Under the Senate proposal, the U.S. Department of Agriculture would play a greater role in implementing farm labor programs and ensuring that farmers and ranchers have all the information they need. As Congress continues to work on this issue, Secretary Vilsack and all of us at USDA are committed to working with lawmakers to be sure they have any technical assistance they might need to finalize these proposals.

Immigration reform is very important for farmers, farmworkers and communities across rural America. The majority of our agricultural workforce is made up of immigrants, and their hard work has helped America's farmers and ranchers lead the world. To remain competitive and keep driving economic growth in rural America, we need rules that work. Rural America needs Congress to act as soon as possible to carry forward the work of the U.S. Senate and fix today's broken immigration system.

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