

DRAFT OP-ED

Farmers have had a lot thrown at them in the past few years—an export dampening trade war, weather disasters that have prevented crop planting and harvesting, and a pandemic that strained the supply chain to near the breaking point. Even with everything else that farmers must deal with, the biggest challenge for most is finding the workers they need to help run their farms and ranches.

Regardless of what Mother Nature or market forces throw at farmers, if they do not have the help to pick crops or care for animals through good years and bad, it's all for not. This is a nationwide challenge, from lettuce farmers in California, to dairy producers in upstate New York, to tomato growers in northwest Ohio or citrus farmers in Florida—all face it.

This crisis has been building for many years, despite the best efforts of farmers. Even offering substantially more than minimum wage to attract more workers has not solved the problem. In many cases, it is not the money that makes these jobs unappealing to many Americans. Rather, the main factors are the often transitory and difficult nature of the work. With businesses across the economy ramping up hiring coming out of the pandemic, Americans simply have other employment opportunities and are not seeking to work on the farm.

[Insert any information on the impact that immigration will have in your state or local area.]

Existing guest worker programs like the H-2A program could, in theory, offer an avenue to find workers. Unfortunately, the program is deeply flawed and in need of significant overhaul to meet the current needs of agriculture. In particular, the program is limited to seasonal farm work; producers who need employees year-round—such as dairy, livestock and horticulture—cannot utilize the program.

While the current seasonality requirements prevent year-round producers from being able to access the program, other producers find the cumbersome application process and added expenses associated with using the H-2A program a hindrance as well. Requirements to provide free housing and transportation and pay the Adverse Effect Wage Rate, an inflated wage rate based on a flawed survey, result in added input costs that many farmers cannot sustain.

Further, many of the existing 1-2 million on-farm employees—estimated between 50 and 70 percent—are not legally authorized to work in the U.S., though many of these workers show farmers documents that look genuine. Failing to provide a way to stabilize over half of the ag workforce would be detrimental to the entire industry.

Farmers and ranchers need Congress to fix these problems. That is why a group of over 120 organizations representing agricultural employers work together as the Agricultural Workforce Coalition (AWC), to speak with one voice and to find a path forward on ag labor reform. The AWC feels any proposal must deal with both current experienced agricultural workers as well as provide for agriculture's future workforce needs. Only by addressing both aspects will America's farmers have access to a stable and secure workforce now and for years to come.

In response to recent congressional attention to this important issue, our organizations are calling on the Senate to begin work on legislation that would help America's farmers keep the workers they already have and more easily find the workers they need to continue to produce this country's safe and nutritious bounty.