February 26, 2013

The Honorable John Boehner
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
1011 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
235 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Harry Reid
Majority Leader
United States Senate
522 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
United States Senate
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Speaker Boehner, Minority Leader Pelosi, Majority Leader Reid and Minority Leader McConnell:

The undersigned groups, representing a broad cross section of American agriculture, encourage you to support immigration reform that addresses agriculture’s unique workforce needs. Agriculture faces a critical lack of workers, a shortage that makes our farms and ranches less competitive and that threatens the abundant, safe and affordable food supply American consumers enjoy today. Securing a reliable agricultural workforce is essential not only for farmers but to the U.S. economy as a whole.

To address this issue, agriculture has united to form the Agriculture Workforce Coalition (AWC). The AWC has developed a new approach that meets the workforce requirements of all of agriculture—both those producers with seasonal labor needs, and those with year-round needs.

The AWC proposal has two components. A large majority of agriculture’s current workforce is undocumented, regardless of farmers’ good faith efforts to verify work authorization. In the short-term, granting work authorization for current experienced agricultural workers will preserve agriculture’s workforce and maintain stability in the sector. For long-term stability, a new market-based agricultural worker visa program is needed that will provide access to a legal and reliable workforce into the future and the flexibility to meet the needs of all producers. To learn more and access the coalition’s proposal, please visit the www.agworkforcecoalition.org.

Action is needed because farmers and ranchers have limited options today when it comes to finding a skilled and dependable workforce. Many jobs in agriculture are physically demanding, conducted in all seasons and are often transitory. These factors make this line of work unappealing to most Americans, even though they offer wages competitive with similar, non-agricultural jobs. It is for this reason that farmers have grown to rely on foreign workers.

The only option for farmers and ranchers to legally achieve the workforce they need is through a broken guest worker program, known as H-2A. The H-2A program’s basic framework is overly
restrictive and difficult for an employer to maneuver; however, in recent years it has become even more unworkable and costly to use. A national survey conducted by the National Council of Agricultural Employers of H-2A employers under the current rules showed that administrative delays have caused an economic loss of nearly $320 million for farms. The program is used out of necessity only, which is why the uncapped program accounts for less than five percent of agriculture’s total labor force.

American agriculture cannot continue as a bright spot in our economy without a legal, stable workforce. Reforms to the immigration system can ensure that our farmers and ranchers have access to the workers they need, both in the short- and long-term. These reforms require a legislative solution, such as the AWC proposal, that moves beyond past initiatives which are no longer viable to meet agriculture’s needs.

We hope you will consider supporting the AWC proposal. Thank you for your attention to this vital issue for American agriculture.

Sincerely,

AgriBank
Agricultural Council of California
Agricultural Retailers Association
Agriculture Coalition for Immigration Reform
Agri-Mark, Inc.
Agri-Placement Services, Inc.
Alabama Farmers Cooperative
American Agri-Women
American Beekeeping Federation
American Farm Bureau Federation
American Horse Council
American Mushroom Institute
American Nursery & Landscape Association
American Soybean Association
American Sugar Cane League
Apricot Producers of California
California Association of Winegrape Growers
California Avocado Commission
California Canning Peach Association
California Citrus Mutual
California Giant Berry Farms
California Grape and Tree Fruit League
California Strawberry Commission
California Women for Agriculture
CoBank
Colorado Wine Industry Development Board
Cooperative Council of North Carolina
Cooperative Network
CountryMark
Dairy Farmers of America
Dairylea Cooperative, Inc.
Equity Cooperative Livestock Sales Association
Farm Credit Council
Farm Credit East
Farm Credit West
Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association
Geneva Area Chamber of Commerce Agriculture Council
Grand Valley Winery Association
Greenstone FCS
Grower-Shipper Association of Central California
Idaho Dairymen's Association
Idaho-Oregon Fruit and Vegetable Association
Land O'Lakes, Inc.
MBG Marketing/The Blueberry People
Michigan Apple Association
Michigan Farm Bureau
Michigan Milk Producers Association
Michigan Processing Apple Growers
Monterey County Farm Bureau
National Association of State Departments of Agriculture
National Berry Crops Initiative
National Christmas Tree Association
National Cotton Council
National Council of Agricultural Employers (NCAE)
National Council of Farmer Cooperatives
National Farmers Union
National Grape Cooperative Association, Inc.
National Milk Producers Federation
National Onion Association
National Peach Council
National Potato Council
New England Apple Council
New York Apple Association, Inc
New York Farm Bureau
New York State Vegetable Growers
Nisei Farmers League
Northeast Ag and Feed Alliance
Northeast Dairy Farmers Cooperatives
Northeast Dairy Producers Association (NEDPA)
Northeast States Association for Agricultural Stewardship
Northwest Farm Credit Services
Northwest Horticultural Council
OFA – The Association of Horticulture Professionals
Oregon Association of Nurseries
Pacific Coast Producers
PennAg Industries Association
Pennsylvania Vegetable Growers Association
Plains Cotton Cooperative Association
Produce Marketing Association
Red Gold, Inc.
Snake River Farmers Association
Society of American Florists
South East Dairy Farmers Association
Southern States Cooperative
St. Albans Cooperative Creamery
State Agriculture and Rural Leaders
Sunkist Growers
Sunsweet Growers, Inc.
Sweet Potato Council of California
Teays River Investments
Tennessee Farmers Cooperative
Texas Agricultural Cooperative Council
Texas International Produce Association
The American Mushroom Institute
The National Cotton Ginners Association
The North American Blueberry Council
U.S. Apple Association
United Dairymen of Arizona
United FCS
United Fresh Produce Association
United Fresh Produce Association
United Potato Growers of America
United Producers
Upstate Niagara Cooperative, Inc.
USA Farmers
Utah Dairy Producers
Washington Farm Bureau
Washington Growers League
Welch’s Foods Inc., A Cooperative
Western Growers Association
Western United Dairymen
Wine America
Yankee Farm Credit

cc: U.S. House of Representatives
    United States Senate