



OP-ED: THE GROWING PROBLEM OF AGRICULTURAL LABOR

By Jerry Hutto
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I grow blueberries in southeastern Mississippi on land that has been in my family for four generations. We farm close to 50 acres of blueberries and need between 25 and 35 workers at harvest time. The overwhelming majority of those workers are Mexican or Central American. Few U.S. citizens apply for these jobs and those that do only last a few days. This leaves us without reliable workers when we need them most – at harvest time.

I'm not the only farmer short on workers these days – far from it. Whether you live in Oregon, Washington, California or out east in states like Alabama and Georgia; whether you grow cherries, berries, apples, pears, tomatoes, asparagus, onions, or ornamental trees – you're in trouble if you tend or pick your crop mostly by hand as opposed to with machines. (Mechanized harvesting works for blueberries that end up in cans or jam, but customers looking for produce to put on the table at mealtime won't pay good money for machine-bruised fruit). According to the U.S. Department of Labor, more than 50 percent of workers on U.S. farms are unauthorized immigrants, and in California, where farming brings in \$38 billion in annual revenue, the number of workers available this year was said to be 20 percent below normal.

Farmers across the country are being battered by a perfect storm. Immigration enforcement is getting tougher. It's much harder and more expensive than even just a few years ago for workers to cross the border without papers. There's more work at home in Mexico, and it's paying better. Many immigrant farm hands lured away from agriculture during the housing boom have not come back. And try as we might – and believe me, we try – most of us still can't replace our foreign workers with Americans.

There's only one solution: a workable, streamlined, legal way to hire *legal* foreign workers. But after more than a decade of trying, Congress can't do its job and create a lawful program that works.

I think I'm pretty typical of farmers like me – small to medium-sized growers with labor-intensive crops. I look at my workers' papers and fill out I-9 employment forms – after all, the last thing I want is to put my operation at risk by hiring an unlawful labor force. I'll raise wages when I have to in order to attract workers – although of course I can only raise them so much before my berries become too expensive to sell. I'd like to hire Americans, and I understand why any temporary worker program would make me try before it let me hire Mexicans or Central Americans.

But, in the end, my crop won't wait. If I can't find enough willing and able U.S. workers, I need a fast, legal, reliable way to hire foreign farm hands. Of course, any program will come with some red tape – I understand that. But there are limits. The existing process for hiring

agricultural guest workers – the H2A program – is so bureaucratic and unreliable that many growers won't use it.

The good news: a lot of farmers in my situation are starting to come together and come up with ideas. Under pressure from growers, several bills were introduced in Congress this year to streamline or replace the H2A program – and in one case, to let currently unauthorized workers go home and return on H2A visas. Nothing passed – Democrats and Republicans couldn't agree. It's an old impasse: most Democrats oppose temporary worker programs and prefer legalizing unauthorized workers, while most Republicans favor visa programs and oppose legalization. But the truth is we need both – an answer for workers already here and a new program. And several farm groups, including the American Farm Bureau, are developing compromise proposals.

I don't understand why this is so hard for Congress. But one thing I do know: what I'll be looking for when I vote. Which of the candidates running for office in my district are ideologues and which are problem solvers? Which can put aside their partisan differences and the grandstanding we're all so sick of and start finding answers for America? I and other American farmers have seen enough politics as usual. We need members of Congress who can come together around a deal that works – for American farmers, American workers and foreigners who want to work in the U.S. legally.