

## OP-ED: FARMERS NEED LAWMAKERS TO WORK TOGETHER FOR LABOR SOLUTION

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 who 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. You're in trouble if you tend or pick your crop mostly by hand as opposed to with machines. According to the Department of Labor, more than 50 percent of workers on U.S. farms are unauthorized immigrants, and in California, 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, most of us still can't replace our foreign workers with Americans.

There's only one solution: a workable, streamlined, legal way to hire foreign workers.

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 men – although, I can only raise them so much before my blueberries 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. The existing process for hiring agricultural guest workers – the H-2A program – is so bureaucratic and unreliable that many growers won't use it.

Under pressure from growers, several bills were introduced in Congress this year to streamline or replace the H-2A program – and one case, to let currently unauthorized workers go home and return on H-2A visas. Nothing passed. 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. The truth is we need both.

I don't understand why this is so hard for Congress. I'm looking for leaders who can put aside their partisan differences 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.

*Jerry Hutto is a fourth-generation blueberry farmer in southeast Mississippi.*