

Agriculture Stakeholders Reach Crucial On Immigration Reform



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A bipartisan group of senators known as the “Gang of Eight” seems to have finally figured out how to fix our country’s broken immigration system and provide a workable system for workers to legally perform important tasks on farms and ranches

year round.

“Agricultural immigration issues are extraordinarily complicated,” said Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah who worked on the farm worker provisions. “That farmers and workers have come together to back this consensus proposal is an achievement that only weeks ago didn’t seem possible.”

The bill was largely crafted by four Democratic senators: Charles Schumer of New York, Dick Durbin of Illinois, Robert Menendez of New Jersey and Michael Bennet of Colorado; and Republicans John McCain of Arizona, Jeff Flake of Arizona, Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and Marco Rubio of Florida. But Hatch and Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., also helped broker the deal between agricultural employers and farm workers.

A similar effort to craft immigration reform is just beginning in the U.S. House of Representatives.

The agreement places a heavy emphasis on border security and provides billions in additional funds to catch people coming over our borders illegally. The bill sets a goal of stopping 90 percent of illegal crossings along the southern border with Mexico. At the same time, the package would allow legal entry for both low- and high-skilled labor for American businesses, including farm workers.

Farm worker provisions

The new farm worker program would replace the current H-2A program and provide a long-term path to legal status for undocumented workers. It would set a cap of 112,000 3-year visas each year and set a formula by which wages for the workers would increase each year with a cap and a floor.

“This agreement means that Colorado growers and producers won’t have to watch their crops rot in the ground or wither on the vines while also providing important protections for workers,” Bennet explained.

Many in the agriculture sector were elated over this latest announcement of a farm worker agreement.

“The framework and objectives of this agreement represent a positive step toward providing America’s dairy farmers access to a legal workforce now and in the future,” noted Jerry Kozak, CEO of the National Milk Producers Federation.

“It’s a complete agreement,” Tom Nassif, president and chief executive officer of Western Growers, told *Agri-Pulse*. “It was intense,

lengthy discussions with union reps.”

As part of the Agriculture Workforce Coalition (AWC), Nassif said his group has been working with the United Farm Workers (UFW) and the senators to reach a deal.

“The agreement the [AWC] was able to negotiate with the UFW is a crucial step in solving our immigration crisis and securing a stable and legal workforce in the years to come,” Nassif said.

“Over the past year, the agriculture community was able to come together in a historically broad coalition. The force of agricultural producers and worker representatives coming together on a framework will play a significant role in achieving immigration reform this year.”

Bob Stallman, president of the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF), said the agreement will help provide farmers with a “much needed legal labor supply.” AFBF is also part of AWC.

“The framework and objectives established today are a positive step toward achieving meaningful immigration reform,” Stallman said. “Ensuring access to a legal workforce is a high priority for AFBF and we are pleased with this first step in the process.”

UFW President Arturo Rodriguez said his organization is “very pleased.”

“Under the proposed new immigration process, farm workers would be able to work in the fields without fear of getting deported immediately and will be able to reunite with their families in a relatively short period of time,” Rodriguez said. “The bill would give professional farm workers presently in the U.S., who have been contributing to our country, temporary legal status and the right to earn a green card in the future by continuing to work in agriculture.”

UFW said, under the proposal, farm workers would have the option to apply for paperwork to legalize their status either through the regular process for non-agricultural workers, or through a special process created for those working in the agriculture industry.

Despite the breakthrough that has been reached on the agricultural worker provisions in the Senate, there are still plenty of hurdles ahead – especially among some conservatives who oppose any new immigration reform plan until the borders are secured.

On the House side, Rep. Bob Goodlatte, R-Va., is chair of the House Judiciary Committee and plans to hold a series of hearings on immigration reform. As a former chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, he understands the unique needs of the farming community.

Goodlatte recently told *Agri-Pulse* that a new temporary agriculture worker program “must be a part of fixing this broken immigration system.” He called the current H-2A visa program used for immigrant farm workers “cumbersome and costly.”

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