

NABC Position on Migrant and Seasonal Labor

The blueberry industry in North America is keenly aware of the critical role played by migrant and seasonal workers in the production and harvesting of our crops and encourages Congress to consider immigration and labor reforms with an eye on the impact to agriculture and the ripple effect these decisions will have on the economy as a whole. Migrant and seasonal laborers offer valuable economic contributions to our business and many others and we stand in support of solutions that are crafted to be mindful of those contributions as well as the costs.

An ideal agricultural labor program should restore respect for the law and embrace a free-market business approach. It should not be cumbersome to employer or employee and it should address both immediate and longer-term labor needs.

A program should provide for a migrant worker partnership with Mexico and other friendly nations, employee verification, reasonable employer responsibilities, and provisions for enforcement.

The employee verification process must be simple and efficient. Migrant workers move frequently from job to job during the harvest season and a quick and accurate verification process is essential for all parties.

The current agricultural guest worker program, H-2A, is ineffective for the family farm business. Blueberry operations are generally small businesses that can not deal with the costs and documentation requirements of the H-2A program. The uncertainty the blueberry grower faces as to whether their request for workers will be approved in time for harvest creates additional challenges and concerns.

Unlike some other agricultural commodities, the blueberry industry does not need a full time local labor source to meet its needs. We employ seasonal labor to hand harvest our fresh blueberries during a harvest season which takes place nationwide from April to October. We need a system tailored to the needs of a migrant rather than static workforce as it is apparent, even with our current economic concerns, that local, native-born U.S. workers do not ask for seasonal farm jobs.

Migrant seasonal workers, such as those employed by the blueberry industry, are necessary for the survival of our industry which, like other agricultural commodities, not only produces safe and locally grown products but also allows U.S. businesses serving the agricultural industry to stay in business and keep jobs in the United States. If agriculture does not have adequate workers, jobs in related support industries will be lost or moved overseas.

We are concerned that various states are now taking their own individual positions on an issue that should be dealt with on the federal level. Legislation such as that recently proposed in Utah recognizes the need to balance smarter enforcement with more workable legal channels; however a state by state response is not the answer to a national challenge that demands a coherent federal response. The agricultural sector will be crippled if one part of the solution moves without the other.

Our industry encourages the Senate and the House to consider immigration and labor reforms with an eye on the impact to agriculture and the ripple effect these decisions will have on the economy as a whole.