

AgJOBS: Food for Thought, Fuel for the Economy

On Thursday, May 14, U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) re-introduced legislation to address the nation's ongoing agriculture labor shortage. The Agricultural Job Opportunities, Benefits and Security Act (AgJOBS) would reform the broken H-2A seasonal worker program, provide farmers with the stable, legal workforce they need, and offer a pathway to citizenship for hard-working, law-abiding immigrants already employed on American farms.

AgJOBS is the result of over a decade of carefully negotiated agreements between business and labor and has two key components:

1. It makes long-term agricultural workers eligible to apply for temporary legal status (a "blue card") and then if certain very specific additional factors are met, such as continuing employment in agriculture, eligible for permanent resident status (a "green card").
2. It reforms the H-2A temporary foreign agricultural worker program by streamlining the hiring process, improving housing benefits, and providing better legal protections.

Our nation's agricultural "ecosystem" is part of a complex network, both domestically and internationally, that is interconnected with virtually every aspect of our economy, from actual production and delivery to commodities trading and global market competition. The economic impacts affect farm equipment manufacturing, packaging, processing, transportation, marketing, lending, and insurance. For example:

- The U.S. has approximately 20% of the international market share for agricultural goods.
- For every 1 agricultural worker job, up to 3 additional jobs are created for U.S. citizens.
- Eliminating immigrant workers from the dairy industry alone would reduce U.S. milk production by 29.5 billion pounds and the number of U.S. farms by 4,532. Retail milk prices would increase by an estimated 61%.
- Approximately 80% of Florida's 150,000 agricultural workers are undocumented immigrants. Their work provides up to 90% of the fresh domestic tomatoes that Americans eat between the months of December and May and are part of a \$1.6 billion a year business.

The AgJOBS Act would prioritize the verification of the workers enrolled through the blue card or the H-2A, both to ensure orderly compliance with the immigration process as preferable to the undocumented status and to protect workers from unscrupulous employers. Blue cards would have encrypted, biometric identifiers and contain other anti-counterfeiting protection.

A well-functioning and competitive agriculture industry is critical to ensuring economic viability for the U.S. and all its workers. Our agricultural industry needs a stable and legal workforce to continue to provide the food that every American family relies upon. Undocumented agricultural workers need the ability to come out of the shadows and not live in fear of unfair labor practices. AgJOBS is a win-win piece of legislation benefiting workers, employers, and the economy at large.

