EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVES ON AGRICULTURE AND IMMIGRATION REFORM

Craig J. Regelbrugge, Co-chairman
Agriculture Coalition for Immigration Reform
VP for Government Relations
American Nursery & Landscape Association
cregelbrugge@anla.org
Overview

- Field Report
- AgJOBS State of Play
- Other Dynamics
- Closing thoughts about the future
Who Is ACIR?

- National ad hoc coalition formed in 2001
- Solely focused on agricultural labor reform legislation
- Over 300 national, regional, state groups representing fruit, vegetable, dairy, livestock, nursery, greenhouse, Christmas tree producers
Field Report

- Farmers who are still farming are still hiring, employing farm workers
- While signs of some workforce reduction for a variety of reasons, master narrative is one of relative employment stability
- ~75% of farmworkers likely unauthorized
- Virtually entire applicant pool unauthorized
- Clear anecdotal evidence that some former farmworkers who left for other jobs are returning. Most feared unauthorized
- Despite recession, few US workers applying
Spotlight on: Wisconsin Dairies
“So as our last two children entered high school, and I realized that soon I would have no family labor to rely on, we moved our farm to all hired labor. I have not been able to hire an American citizen since 1997. I have tried! The way I see it, if we didn’t have Hispanics to rely on for a work force, I don't believe I could continue farming.”

-- WI dairy farmer with 150 cows, 2007
AgJOBS

- Landmark agreement among worker, employer advocates
- Reached in 2003, passed Senate 2006
- Two-part approach:
  - Significant overhaul of H-2A program
  - Earned legalization for experienced farmworkers subject to strict conditions
AgJOBS State of Play

- S.1038, H.R.2414 reintroduced May 14
- Bills essentially same as last Congress
- Senate: Feinstein is champion. 16 original cosponsors
- House: Berman (D-CA, Putnam (R-FL) plus 25 cosponsors
  - varied geography, ideology…mix of aggies, blue dogs, Hispanic Caucus, the occasional liberal / conservative
  - Peterson, Lofgren, Gutierrez…etc.
State of Play...

- Unlikely that Congress will consider AgJOBS ahead of broader “comprehensive” discussion
- AgJOBS can move as part of comprehensive or smaller package
- Unique place in the debate... only place where “left/right” agreement is intact
- Ag presents political “training wheels”
Who Supports AgJOBS?

- Hundreds of producer groups
- Unions, worker and immigrant advocates
- Faith based organizations
- General business e.g. US Chamber, Small Business Legislative Council
- Government groups like Nat’l Assn of Counties, State Agriculture Secretaries and Commissioners
- Conservative groups like Americans for Tax Reform, Americas Majority Foundation
Other Dynamics

- H-2A regs
  - Mixed bag at outset. Future looks doubtful.
  - Challenge: managing chaos

- Obama enforcement stance
  - From “undocumented worker” to “employer”
  - Stepped up I-9 audits and investigations

- “No-match” rule
  - Ball is in Court’s court
Thoughts Going Forward

“We hold these threats to be self-evident…”
- Management decisions to scale back or substitute
- Next generation says “no, thanks…”
- Offshoring, loss of market share

If Past is Prologue…
- Neither side has a realistic opportunity to improve its position by waiting
- One-sided victories likely to be short-lived
The AgJOBS Journey...