

AGRICULTURAL LABOR

SAF's "Ask":

Congress must pass legislation to address the agricultural labor crisis by providing legal status for current agricultural employees and ensuring employers have access to a stable and secure workforce now and in the future.

The devastating labor shortage is impacting flower growing operations today and jeopardizes the future success of the floriculture sector along with the vitality of rural economies, which rely upon agriculture as a primary economic driver. Small- and medium-sized growers are at a critical juncture caused by the small margin between profitability and loss due to the labor-intensive nature of this sector and misguided federal policy on agricultural labor. The impact goes far beyond the farm gate, as each on-farm employee supports two to three other jobs up and down the food and agriculture supply chain.

SAF advocates for meaningful reforms to the H-2A program. Employers using the H-2A program go through expensive, complicated hiring processes to secure the labor needed in addition to ensuring compliance with strict housing and transportation standards. On top of this, employers must pay wages based on the Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR), which changes annually and often with surprisingly sharp increases. Over the last five years, the national average AEWR has increased by 17%, reaching an average AEWR of \$13.99 per hour for H-2A workers.

In March the House passed the Farm Workforce Modernization Act by a 247-174 vote. This bill establishes a program for farmworkers to earn legal status through continued agriculture work, giving those who have worked at least 180 days in the last two years temporary status. The bill also makes changes to the H-2A temporary agricultural worker visa program by setting up a pilot program to allow visa holders to change jobs without a new application. It also develops an e-Verify system for agricultural employers.

While the bill isn't perfect and SAF has some concerns about the potential for escalating costs, SAF appreciates the House's passage of the bill. It is an important first step toward policies SAF has worked to advance over the past decade. SAF requests that the Senate consider and pass an agriculture immigration bill so that a final conference agreement can be reached and enacted into law without further delay.