

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
May 23, 2013

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FARMWORKER JUSTICE APPLAUDS SENATE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE BILL ON COMPREHENSIVE IMMIGRATION REFORM

Farmworker Justice today said the immigration bill approved by the Senate Judiciary Committee marks an important step toward enactment of badly needed comprehensive immigration reform.

On Tuesday night the Senate Judiciary Committee finished debating and amending the immigration bill drafted by the Senate's bipartisan "Gang of Eight." The Committee then voted to approve and send to the floor of the Senate the amended version of the Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act, S.744.

Farmworker Justice President Bruce Goldstein issued the following statement:

"Farmworker Justice commends the Senate Judiciary Committee for the passage of the Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act, which marks an important step forward towards passage of comprehensive immigration reform, which is so important to our nation.

"If enacted, S.744 would provide a roadmap to citizenship for the 11 million undocumented immigrants and make other needed changes to fix our broken immigration system. The bill contains two programs of great importance that focus on agriculture. The programs represent the agricultural compromise that was reached after several months of intense efforts by the United Farm Workers, major agribusiness associations, and Senators Feinstein (D-CA), Bennet (D-CO), Rubio (R-FL) and Hatch (R-UT). The agreement includes numerous concessions made in longstanding, strongly-held positions in recognition of the urgent need for immigration reform for farmworkers and for our nation. In the absence of broad support in the Senate, desperately-needed immigration reform will not occur.

"The first program would grant eligible farmworkers, now undocumented, the opportunity to earn legal immigration status by proving their recent agricultural work in the United States. Farmworkers who earn the "blue card" can then earn a green card by continuing to work in agriculture for three to five years. Under this "blue card" program, the farmworkers' immediate families residing in the U.S. also would be eligible for legal status. The legalization program, if enacted, will help stabilize the farm labor force and enable farmworkers to become more integrated into our economy and our society. It would also help families remain together and build better lives for farmworkers' children.

"The second program, which would replace the current H-2A agricultural guestworker program, would establish new W-3 and W-4 temporary work visas for foreign workers

recruited by U.S. agricultural employers. The future guestworker program contains important protections against job displacement and depression in wages for U.S. citizens and permanent-resident immigrants, as well as for the future blue-card workers in the legalization program.

“The streamlining of the guestworker application process, the lowering of wage rates for employers of future guestworkers, and the shift of responsibility from the Department of Labor to the Department of Agriculture are among the changes sought by agricultural employers and allies in Congress. The compromise is not ideal but it is acceptable and should be supported,” Goldstein said.

“We appreciate the successful efforts of Senator Blumenthal to include in the bill and to strengthen through amendments a new program to regulate international labor recruiters with the goals of preventing and remedying human trafficking and other abuses inflicted on workers recruited abroad for work in US visa programs such as the H-2A program and the new W3 and W4 programs. In addition to curbing abuse, these provisions would prevent unfair competition against law-abiding employers, and maintain the integrity of America’s visa programs.”

Farmworker Justice is a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization that seeks to empower migrant and seasonal farmworkers to improve their living and working conditions, immigration status, health, occupational safety, and access to justice.