

For Immediate Release
July 18, 2017

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Farmworker Justice Condemns House Amendment to the DHS Appropriations Bill Expanding the H-2A Agricultural Guestworker Program to Year-Round Jobs

Washington, DC -The House Appropriations Committee, while voting on the spending bill for the Department of Homeland Security today, suddenly added a fundamental, substantive change to the H-2A temporary foreign agricultural worker program. The amendment would require the U.S. government to approve employers' applications for permission to hire agricultural guestworkers for jobs that are year-round; H-2A visas could be issued without regard to whether the jobs are temporary or seasonal. The effort to change the scope of the H-2A program through an amendment on the appropriations bill was led by Rep. Newhouse (R-WA), with the support of Representatives Cuellar (D-TX) and Aguilar (D-CA).

Farmworker Justice strongly opposes this proposed change and the method by which it was adopted. Bruce Goldstein, President of Farmworker Justice, said: "Expanding the H-2A program to year-round jobs would contravene the purpose of the program and further distort the agricultural labor market. The H-2A program is premised on the idea that it may be difficult to find U.S. workers for seasonal farm jobs because they yield lower annual incomes than year-round jobs. That same logic does not apply to year-round employment. Agricultural employers with year-round jobs should do what any other employer must do to attract and retain workers: improve wages and working conditions."

This amendment does nothing to fix the H-2A program. The H-2A program is rife with abuses resulting from unscrupulous employers that take advantage of the vulnerable guestworkers, displacing U.S. workers and undermining U.S. workers' labor standards. Moreover, expanding the H-2A program to include year-round jobs does nothing to address the roughly one million current farmworkers who are undocumented and face the threat of detection and deportation. It makes little sense to allow employers to hire H-2A workers to displace their current undocumented farmworkers.

Farmworker Justice calls on Congress to prevent this amendment from passing and to pass legislation granting immigration status and a path to citizenship for undocumented workers and their family members. The solution to the agricultural industry's reliance on immigrant workers must be to respect the contributions and humanity of those workers by passing comprehensive immigration reform. The Agricultural Worker Program Act would do that by providing an opportunity to move forward a positive and workable solution in Congress that will meet the needs of workers, agricultural employers, and our food system.

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