



Report by Trump Administration Task Force on Agriculture and Rural Prosperity Fails Farmworkers, their Families and their Communities

On January 8, Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue, Chair of the inter-agency Task Force on Agriculture and Rural Prosperity, established by President Trump, publicly released its Report to the President of the United States, which is dated October 21, 2017.

The 42-page report is fundamentally flawed because it ignores the interests and needs of farmworkers and their family members. While it acknowledges the existence of farmworkers, it treats them largely as economic inputs utilized by farmers rather than as living, breathing human beings who are vital to the economy and rural communities.

The report makes no mention of the word immigration despite it being of vital significance to the future of agriculture and rural communities. The Task Force states that farmers are having difficulty finding workers who are citizens or lawful permanent residents to fill their jobs, and acknowledges that undocumented workers are being hired. It does not, however, state the reality that at least one-half (and probably much more) of the farm labor force is undocumented. In a major failing, the report does not recommend immigration reform that would grant undocumented workers a chance for immigration status and a path to citizenship.

The report ignores the relationship between the growers' difficulty attracting and retaining adequate numbers of workers and the fact that agricultural work in the U.S. is characterized by low wages and lack of fringe benefits, high rates of injuries and workplace abuses, and discrimination in labor laws that deprives farmworkers of many protections applicable to most other workers. The report does not discuss the need to remedy and prevent the rampant violations of labor protections in agriculture that harm farmworkers as well as law-abiding employers.

The report suggests that the Administration will be making policy and regulatory changes to the H-2A agricultural guestworker program in response to complaints that were "well communicated by farmers." The report ignores the many well-documented abuses experienced by farmworkers under the H-2A program. Nor does the report suggest why agricultural workers should be forced into a guestworker status with no path to democratic or economic freedoms applicable to immigrants and citizens.

Even when discussing the needs of rural communities in order to improve quality of life – such as addressing gaps in infrastructure, housing, access to health care and internet connectivity – the report fails to identify the particular challenges faced by farmworkers. Instead the report focuses on the needs of businesses and farm owners or other rural residents.

The report briefly mentions the need for science-based regulations to ensure the health of consumers of food, but there is no mention of confronting pesticides and other occupational hazards that disproportionately kill and injure farmworkers.

The Task Force also lost an opportunity to encourage positive trends in agriculture by neglecting to discuss corporate social responsibility in the food supply chain. Government should encourage companies that are responding to consumers' demands for assurances that food production occurs responsibly with regard to the treatment of farmworkers in the fields.

Any report on the future of agriculture and rural prosperity should recognize the contributions and needs of the nation's approximately 2.5 million farmworkers and their family members. The Task Force does not appear to have taken advantage of the informed views of many farmworkers and their representatives as well as numerous reports, books and studies about the needs of this nation's farmworkers, families and communities. This report, despite raising some valid concerns and offering some helpful recommendations about agriculture and rural communities, has failed the President and the public.

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