

North Carolina farmers need help

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Agriculture is NC's #1 industry. It contributes \$92 billion to our economy and supports over 770,000 jobs. NC leads the nation in tobacco, sweet potato, egg and poultry production, is third in pork production, and ranks 9th in the U.S. in value of agricultural products sold.

But NC's small farmers struggle to sustain a living. As a result, we're losing farmers. In 2021, NC had 45,100 farms, 14,020 fewer than in 1997. Many family farms are disappearing.

Our farmers' biggest need is workers

The North Carolina Farm Bureau (NCFB) is NC's largest farm organization, with over 500,000 member families. Its president, Shawn Harding, has been a farmer all his life. When asked about the challenges NC farmers face, he said: "I think the first and foremost one that comes to everyone's mind is labor. We need labor. We need a stable labor force. And that's been an issue for many years, and it continues to be an issue as our country struggles with an immigration policy."

Our farmers depend on immigrant workers

Harding's predecessor at NCFB, Larry Wooten, says: "The supply of local labor dried up in the mid-80s. I began to use immigrant labor because they were the ones who were available and wanted the work." Now, immigrant workers are vital to NC's economy.

With our farmers dependent upon immigrants, that means huge numbers of native-born North Carolinians essentially owe their jobs to immigrant workers. "There's a multiplier effect: If it weren't for immigrants out there picking beans and getting products to market, there'd be tremendous numbers of Americans out of work," Wooten says. The North Carolina Growers Association (NCGA) supplies workers to NC farms. NCGA is the nation's largest user of the H-2A guest worker program because, it says, there aren't enough willing native workers.

A study of NCGA's experience hiring workers found that, even if every native applicant had been hired and finished the growing season, they would have filled only 4.1 percent of the jobs available. That's why the vast majority of workers at NCGA farms are H-2A visa holders.

Worker shortages drive inflation

Labor scarcity is a major cause of rising food costs. Not solving the labor problem will drive up food prices and force us to import food. “Ultimately, as a society, we need to address this issue,” said Harding. “It’s either pay more or get it from somewhere else. And that’s the challenge that we have to face ... in how we move forward with immigration policy and labor issues.”

Lee Wicker, NCGA’s deputy director, says: “U.S. citizens are not going to grow our food. So, are we going to grow it here with guest workers or are we going to import it? And is that the safe choice when you don’t have control over your food production within your borders?”

Farm Workforce Modernization Act

There is a solution: the Farm Workforce Modernization Act (FWMA). It was cosponsored by 48 Democrats and 13 Republicans, including Elise Stefanik, Chair of the House Republican Conference. Co-sponsor Dan Newhouse (R-WA) said: “By creating a secure, reliable agriculture labor program, this legislation removes opportunities to work illegally in the United States, strengthens our border security, lowers food costs for Americans, and ensures we have a stable, legal workforce for our farms and ranches for years to come.”

Farmers and businesses endorse FWMA

FWMA was endorsed by hundreds of farm groups across the country, including NCFB, NCGA, North Carolina Dairy Producers Association, North Carolina Nursery & Landscape Association, and North Carolina Potato Association.

It was also endorsed by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce: “Our leaders need to address this pressing situation, and the only way that meaningful policy changes will be enacted is if Republicans and Democrats work together to achieve those results for the American people,” said Neil Bradley, the Chamber’s chief policy officer.

FWMA passed the House of Representatives last March with bipartisan support, 247-174. President Biden endorsed it and was eager to sign it, but Senate Republicans blocked it as the legislative session ended in December. That means it has to go back to square one with the new Congress. The new Republican-controlled House needs to pass it and the Senate’s Republican minority must let it come to a vote.

Tell Republicans: Pass FWMA

That's where you can help. Shamefully, none of NC's Republican representatives voted for the bill. Contact Rep. Rouzer and Senators Budd and Tillis and tell them it's time to decide: are they going to help solve this problem, or do they only want to exploit it for political gain?

Demand that Republicans work with Democrats to secure our borders, protect our food supply, fight inflation and give NC farmers the help they desperately need by voting for the Farm Workforce Modernization Act.