

FARMWORKER PLAN SHOULD BE WEEDED OUT, NOT REVAMPED

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Body

HERE WE GO AGAIN.

The Bush administration is about to revamp the mostly useless federal temporary farmworker program.

The idea is to try to alleviate the critical shortage of agricultural workers created by the lack of immigration reform and the repressive policies against undocumented workers and families.

Both the industry and the workers have received the plan with skepticism.

"Growers and producers appreciate that the Bush administration knows there is a problem," said Craig Regelbrugge, vice president of Government Relations and Research at the American Nursery and Landscape Association.

"Some of the proposals could help some," he said. "But they do not present the broad solution needed to address the labor crisis. We support bipartisan legislation, such as AgJobs, that addresses the whole problem in a way that is fair to workers and good for employers."

The measure that Bush wants to enact is like "painting the house when the roof is on fire," said Eliseo Medina, executive vice president of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

And not only because it is too little and too late, but because by failing to provide an avenue to legalization for the workers, it closes another door to any real solution to the immigration crisis.

President Bush's plan, sort of a second act to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's disastrous Bracero program, is a guest worker program with no road to permanent residency and citizenship. It is a dead end.

Like FDR's program, the "new" Washington plan seems to be just another way to bring in temporary immigrant workers as cheap labor to harvest the crops.

Yet, the farm labor crisis is real. Heartless immigration raids and persecution-only policies have only exacerbated the problem. After all, about 80% of the farm labor force in the U.S. is foreign-born - and most of it is undocumented.

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"Careful study of farm labor force demographics and trends indicate that there is not a replacement domestic workforce available to fill these jobs," the Washington-based Agriculture Coalition for Immigration Reform said in a December 2007 letter to Congress.

"In the long run, consequences are much more serious, threatening the safety and security of our food supply and the vibrancy of our economy," Regelbrugge has said. "The real big risk is that labor shortages could force the producers of our food supply to leave the country."

If this happens the livelihoods of millions of Americans whose jobs exist because of the country's agricultural production would disappear.

"For each farmworker job, three others exist around it," Regelbrugge warned. "Packers, truckdrivers, people who work in shipping and many others - most of those jobs would also have to move if production is forced to move out."

DESPITE the looming crisis, Congress failed to pass legislation - known as AgJobs - to legalize undocumented farmworkers. Washington's new plan does not require the approval of Congress.

Farm industry representatives such as Regelbrugge have cautiously welcomed the new initiative and advocates for farmworkers also have expressed concerns about the program resulting in even lower pay for the laborers.

"We must replace temporary worker programs with bipartisan policy like AgJobs that guarantee immigrant workers long-term visas, full labor and civil rights protections, and a chance to become US citizens," Medina said.

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