

WALL STREET JOURNAL

HOUSE GOP BILL: 500,000 FARMWORKER VISAS

By Sara Murray
April 26, 2013

A GOP-backed immigration bill in the House would offer 500,000 farmworker visas – far more than a Senate plan – and cut benefits for laborers.

The bill House Judiciary Committee Chairman Robert Goodlatte (R., Va.) is pursuing to overhaul immigration laws. He also released legislation to make E-verify, the system that checks workers' legal status, mandatory for employers.

Mr. Goodlatte's plan would replace the existing agricultural visa program with a new program designed to allow workers to stay in the U.S. for up to 18 months. That would allow them to work for dairy farms and food processors, two industries that have pushed for a more flexible program to allow year-round labor. It makes 500,000 visas available each year, dwarfing a Senate proposal to allow 112,000 visas a year in the early stages of the program.

"We have to get this right so that farmers aren't burdened with another failed guest-worker program for decades to come," Mr. Goodlatte said in a statement.

Both farmworkers unions and growers signed off on the Senate agreement, but there's little chance of reaching such accord under the House bill. The House legislation could prove attractive to the business community, but it was immediately slammed by a farmworkers union.

"The proposal would create a new agricultural guest-worker program that would result in massive job losses for U.S. workers by transforming the farm labor force into a system of temporary workers with no meaningful protections or rights," the UFW said in a statement.

While the Senate plan requires employers to provide housing for foreign workers and pay some of their travel expenses, the House bill includes no such benefits. The House bill also withholds 10% of farm workers' wages until they leave the country, a move designed to make sure laborers don't overstay their visas.

Like the Senate plan, the House legislation would allow workers to switch to other agricultural employers in certain circumstances.

The piecemeal approach in the House has already faced criticism, both from immigration advocates and lawmakers who crafted an immigration plan in the Senate. Mr. Goodlatte said Friday the step-by-step approach would give lawmakers a better chance to understand all the issues.

"While it is important that we reform our immigration system as a whole, we must look at each of the individual issues within the larger system to ensure that we get immigration reform right," Mr. Goodlatte said in a statement. "If we fail to examine each issue methodically, we risk making the same mistakes of the past that have created the problems we face today."