



New day, new push to legalize farmworkers

By Matt O'Brien, Contra Costa Times
May 15, 2009

Sen. Dianne Feinstein on Thursday introduced a bill that would grant amnesty to up to 1.35 million farmworkers who are working in the country illegally, many of them in California.

Nicknamed the AgJobs Bill, the measure has been proposed multiple times this decade, without success, by Feinstein and other legislators. Some supporters are hoping it might fare better under the Obama administration.

California's labor-intensive agriculture industry and worker advocates, such as the United Farm Workers of America, have long pushed for the reform measure.

"We have acknowledged for a number of years that a significant part of our labor force presents fraudulent documents in order to get work," said Bryan Little, director of labor relations for the California Farm Bureau.

While drought problems have reduced the demand for labor this year, Little said growers remain concerned about the worker shortages experienced earlier in the decade when lucrative construction jobs pulled employees away from the fields.

"A lot of people who used to do farm work were nailing up housing for construction in Elk Grove," Little said. "Farmers couldn't get people coming to do the work for any price."

The bill would allow foreign farmworkers who have already been working illegally in the United States for at least two years to earn a path toward becoming legal residents. Family members would also be eligible, potentially bringing the total number of legalized residents to about 2 million people.

Feinstein's bill, co-sponsored by 16 other senators, none of them Republicans, would also revamp a program that recruits foreign workers for seasonal jobs on American farms. Most California farmers currently avoid using guest workers because of the complications and costs involved with participating in the federal program, Little said.

In a written statement, Feinstein said the bill would help ensure a "consistent, reliable agriculture work force" amid concerns that there is not enough labor to tend and harvest American crops.

"Farmers have been forced to decrease the size of their farms and switch to less labor-intensive and less profitable crops," the statement said. "Efforts have been made for years to get Americans to do the work, but they simply won't do it."

With millions of Americans now out of work, Roy Beck, director of NumbersUSA, which favors lower immigration levels, said he believed few would buy the arguments made by Feinstein, who he described as primarily representing western farm interests.

"We've allowed western agricultural work to become a foreign job," Beck said. "California farmers have gotten lazy, and they're just addicted to this kind of illegal labor."

Feinstein's office provided a long list of supporters, including California farm networks growing everything from avocados to wine grapes and dried plums.

In the Bay Area, the number of farms has dwindled in recent decades. But in Contra Costa County, which produced \$70 million worth of farm products last year, county agricultural commissioner Vince Guise said local farmers continue to have legitimate concerns about navigating through complicated federal immigration rules and finding enough workers to pick crops.

"You hear from some people who say, 'We have teenagers, we have young adults who aren't employed, but a lot of them don't want to do the work,'" said Guise, who picked cantaloupes and tomatoes as a child. "It is very hard work."

Beck said streamlining the legal guest-worker program to make it more palatable for California farmers is the only part of the bill that makes sense, but he said he was adamantly opposed to the amnesty provision.

"Why should we provide permanent residency and eventual access to all U.S. jobs by all these illegal workers?" Beck said. "The rationale seems to be we need to do that because we need so many farmworkers, but they're not going to stay farmworkers."

Maria Machuca, spokeswoman for the United Farm Workers, said more than 50 percent of California's agricultural workers are undocumented. She said legalizing them makes sense because it maintains a workforce skilled at what it does while also protecting the workers from abuse.

"You can't have farmworkers who are afraid to speak up because that also drags down the salaries of those who are here legally," Machuca said. "The agricultural industry needs these farmworkers and the workers have been here for a long time already. They know how to do this work."

Reps. Howard Berman, D-Calif., and Adam Putnam, R-Fla., have introduced companion legislation in the House of Representatives.

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