

## ***FOCUS ON AGRICULTURE***

American Farm Bureau Federation

*For the week of: April 5, 2010*

### **Season Right for Meaningful Immigration Reform**

*By Ron Gaskill*

It's prime production season for many of America's farm and ranch families. Soil is being worked, seeds are being sown, trees and plants are awakening. Milk is flowing from the nation's dairy herds and newborn animals are being nurtured in barns and pastures from coast to coast.

Springtime on the farm is when life springs anew and high hopes abound for a successful and productive period of growth. Sadly, the fresh optimism of this season is being dimmed somewhat by one ominous challenge—there is a dire shortage of people to work alongside our farm families to produce, tend and eventually harvest our agricultural bounty.

Even in these times of higher-than-usual unemployment, most farmers and ranchers still struggle to find all the workers they need for a successful season. Serious concerns that not enough domestic workers will choose to work in agriculture has become a harsh reality across the countryside.

About 15 million people in the United States choose non-farm jobs at wages that are actually lower than what they could earn by working alongside farmers and ranchers. The on-farm jobs and opportunities are there, but many workers choose not to take advantage of them.

The issue is rapidly moving from one centered on a lack of resources, to one with food insecurity at its heart.

Farmers and ranchers are the ones being squeezed; caught between a domestic labor force that doesn't want agricultural work, government policy that fails to recognize the seriousness of the problem and an administration that consistently makes it harder to hire workers.

U.S. consumers will continue to eat fresh fruits and vegetables regardless of how the labor scenario ultimately plays out. But, whether or not those fruits and vegetables are grown in the U.S. or imported from other countries where labor is more plentiful greatly concerns Farm Bureau. It's past time for our nation's policymakers to translate grassroots concern into meaningful action.

As much as we believe in a farmer's right to farm, Farm Bureau fully respects the right of U.S. workers to choose other lines of work. But, on the flip side, as employers, we must be able to legally employ those who do want to work, even if they're from other countries. Comprehensive immigration reform is needed, so that America's farmers and ranchers can continue to produce an abundant supply of safe, healthy food, as well as renewable fuels and fiber for our nation.

A recently released framework for comprehensive immigration reform offered by Sens. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) offers bright hope for reform. As the old saying goes however, the devil really is in the details. We need more specifics before we can fully assess the value of the plan to U.S. agriculture.

Meaningful labor reform that helps all of agriculture bloom this spring would prepare a seedbed for success, for this season and beyond. Agriculture is a tough, demanding job and farmers and ranchers know in many cases it is a job they cannot complete alone.