

[Letter from Senators Larry Craig and Dianne Feinstein]

August 13, 2007

Response to Senator Sessions re the Agricultural Job Opportunities, Benefits, and Security (AgJOBS) Act of 2007

Dear Colleague:

We are responding to Senator Sessions' August 3, 2007 letter on the AgJOBS bill. American agriculture is facing a crisis. Our nation's \$260 billion agriculture industry depends largely on undocumented workers. Today, it is estimated that at least 70 percent of the workers who plant, prune, and harvest American fruits and vegetables are undocumented. Without them, American farmers will not be able to fully harvest their crops.

We have found over the years that there simply are not enough Americans willing to do this work. Today's farm workers are highly skilled - they know how to harvest, how to pack, how to can. To take this workforce away would collapse the industry. In fact, we've already started to see the effect of worker shortages across the country:

- In Michigan, farmers lost 20 percent of their asparagus crop earlier this year because they didn't have enough workers;
- In Washington, raspberries have died on the vine because there was no one available to pick them;
- In Georgia, melon farmers report that their crops are in danger of spoiling because their labor is short;
- In Idaho, there was an 18 percent shortage of farm workers last year and potato growers predict greater labor shortages for the current cycle; and
- In North Carolina, farmers lost nearly a third of their cucumber crop last year because of worker shortages.

Thus far in California, more than 11,000 jobs have been transferred to Mexico and 46,000 acres of Mexican farmland have been taken over by California farmers. The farmers simply cannot count on a farm labor crew to harvest their crops in the United States. The result is that Americans will become more and more dependent on foreign food sources. Growers report importing more produce from Central and South America. And China, the world's largest apple producer, has been eyeing the U.S. apple market for years. Were cheap Chinese apples to reach U.S. supermarkets, an industry spokeswoman predicts the effect on U.S. apple growers would be "absolutely devastating."

The question is, particularly in light of recent evidence of the debatable safety of foreign food products, why would we put American families at risk by continuing to ignore this threat to our own fresh food source? The solution to the American agricultural labor crisis is AgJOBS. AgJOBS is a two part bill. Part one is a time-limited, narrowly-tailored program that stabilizes agricultural labor by identifying and dealing with those undocumented experienced agricultural workers who have been working in the United States for the past 2 years or more. Part two reforms the H-2A temporary agricultural guest worker program that is unworkable for most farmers today - so that growers will have access to a legal workforce in the future.

AgJOBS is not amnesty

AgJOBS applies to a limited group of experienced workers - those who can prove that they have been working in agriculture for the past two years - and their spouses and children who already live in the United States. They would be allowed to continue working legally if they stay in agriculture for the next

3-5 years and meet other requirements: they must undergo a background check, they must pay taxes on the money they earn, they are not eligible for welfare benefits, they must pay a \$500 fine plus processing fees, and they will be deported for committing any violent or serious property crimes. Most important to the agriculture industry, if these workers leave agriculture before meeting their work requirements, they face deportation.

Anyone who has watched the harvest of fruits and vegetables knows that it is one of the most difficult, back-breaking jobs in our country. It is seasonal work that requires workers to travel from farm to farm. It is work that Americans won't do. And growers have made clear they need to retain this experienced work force. The bottom line is that the AgJOBS bill is a workable, bipartisan compromise negotiated by the stakeholders themselves: both farm workers and growers. It is supported by over 880 farmers, growers, worker organizations and organization leaders.

It is a limited, targeted program that will sunset in 5 years. And it is vital to the health of American agriculture and American food security.

We urge you to reject Senator Sessions' simplistic and inaccurate label of "amnesty." U.S. agriculture will not be helped by name-calling and histrionics, but by support for the thoughtful, desperately needed reforms contained in AgJOBS.

Sincerely  
Dianne Feinstein  
United States Senator

Larry Craig  
United States Senator