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Cantaloupe Growers Lobby Congress on Immigration Reform

By: Heidi Przybyla – July 23, 2013

Mornings for Bruce Frasier, an onion and cantaloupe grower in southwest Texas, are tinged with anxiety over whether enough day laborers will arrive in vans to harvest his crops.

“It’s a heck of a way for a businessman to start his day,” said Frasier, who visited Washington to express his concerns about a dwindling labor force as he sought to persuade members of his Republican Party to revise U.S. immigration laws.

Frasier’s initiative emphasizes the crucial role business owners, in particular agricultural producers and technology companies that rely on immigrants, will play in the U.S. House debate over easing current restrictions.

The industries’ voices may serve as a counterweight to Tea Party advocates who oppose revamping U.S. immigration policy, particularly Republicans from conservative-voting districts in states such as Texas.

Small-business testimonials may be more compelling to House lawmakers than the force of corporate lobbyists such the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which played a major role in the debate leading to Senate passage last month of legislation that would provide a path to citizenship to about 11 million undocumented immigrants now in the U.S.

‘Cowboy Boots’

“Small- and medium-sized business owners, or white guys in cowboy boots, are standing up and making their voices heard,” said Tamar Jacoby, president of ImmigrationWorks USA, a business network that favors legal immigration. “There’s nothing more valuable for a member of Congress than to hear from somebody who votes in his district, who creates jobs in his district and who potentially provides local cover at election time.”

The business community and its lobbying efforts may be no match for opposition to immigration legislation from many House Republicans. Redistricting after the 2010 Census caused many House districts to become more white and conservative.

“The vast majority of Republicans in the House do not have any kind of electorate that is pushing for this,” said Roy Beck, president of NumbersUSA, a group that opposes a path to citizenship. If a House Republican supports an immigration-law rewrite “it would be the perfect opportunity for a challenger” in a primary in 2014, he said.

Meanwhile, Texas grower Frasier and his allies want to bridge differences over the most intractable issue in the immigration debate: creating a version of citizenship or legal working status for undocumented workers. President Barack Obama, who received 71 percent of the Hispanic vote last year, has said he won't sign a bill without a path to citizenship, and some House Republicans say that's a nonstarter.

'Somehow, Somewhere'

"Republicans are afraid of being chastised for giving amnesty for 11 million people," said Frasier, who met with a number of Texas Republicans on the House Judiciary Committee that oversees immigration legislation. "I know my workers. They just care about being able to work. Somehow, somewhere there has to be a compromise."

Companies lobbying House members have disparate goals. Technology firms want more visas for high-skilled workers while agricultural producers want a separate guest-worker program.

Construction contractors are seeking to raise the cap on the number of guest workers under a Senate-brokered bill. They're unified by an understanding that none will benefit unless Democrats and Republicans can resolve the issue of citizenship.

Separately, Senators including Republican John McCain of Arizona and Democrat Chuck Schumer of New York have nudged large companies and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce to step up efforts to influence House members during the congressional recess set to begin in August.

Groups, including ImmigrationWorks, have been flying to Washington business owners from the home states of Judiciary Committee members, organizing letter-writing campaigns and placing opinion editorials.

'Real Stories'

The Associated Builders and Contractors last month brought about 400 contractors to Washington as part of an annual meeting to talk with their home-state lawmakers. The International Franchise Association plans to bring about 500 small business owners for a similar event in September.

"Members of Congress are saying they're not hearing from their constituents that immigration is a concern," said Matt Haller, an IFA spokesman. "We've been trying to bring the real business-owner stories to light."

In their pitch, the Association for Competitive Technology reported that most top mobile applications are made by small companies in the U.S. The firms' need for workers could be addressed if lawmakers adopt less restrictive immigration policies, said Morgan Reed, executive director for the Washington-based lobbying group.

'Talent Drain'

"We want to impress upon members that this talent drain isn't something only on the coasts, but in every part of the country," Reed said.

The demand for the visas was underscored in April, when U.S. companies exceeded the 85,000-worker H-1B cap within five days of the start of the annual application process.

The competitive technology group is courting lawmakers who have pivotal roles in immigration legislation, such as House Judiciary Committee Chairman Bob Goodlatte, a Virginia Republican.

The group has flown application makers to meet with members of Congress, and has urged them to post Twitter messages and blogs.

FWD.us, the bipartisan political action group funded by Facebook Inc. (FB) founder Mark Zuckerberg and other technology executives, plans to buy advertising and hold events in U.S. House districts, said Rob Jesmer, the group's campaign manager.

FWD.us has scheduled a meeting in Chicago on July 26 to spur discussion among technology entrepreneurs, members of Congress and the public.

Laborer Shortage

Frasier, whose Carrizo Springs farm is roughly 40 miles from the Mexican border, says his workforce is aging and that as early as next year, he could face a shortage of laborers who harvest his crops by hand. Most documented workers are hired by oil companies that dot the region, he said.

"No one raises their kids up with aspirations to be a farm worker; we realize it's on the lower end of the totem pole in the hierarchy of jobs," said Frasier.

Texas farm wages were up 5 percent last year while the number of workers was largely stagnant, said Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration analyst at the Cato Institute, a Washington-based research group dedicated to Libertarian principles.

"There is an increasingly tight labor market in Texas for low-skilled workers, especially in agriculture," Nowrasteh said, citing data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Even so, Tea Party lawmakers who represent southern districts oppose granting undocumented workers a path to citizenship or legalized working status.

Legal Status

Frasier avoids the word "citizenship," speaking instead of the potential for a congressional compromise over "adjusting" immigrant worker legal status.

"I don't want a government big enough that can round up 11 million people," Frasier said. "They have to be able to live and work over here and earn their path to legalized status," he said.

One of the Republicans Frasier met with in Washington is Representative Lamar Smith of Texas, who is playing a role on the House Judiciary Committee in advancing immigration legislation.

Smith's position reflects the difficulty Frasier faces in promoting a compromise on citizenship. The Judiciary Committee has approved four bills dealing with immigration, including a

biometric entry-exit system, an agricultural guest-worker program and a bill to increase the number of high-skilled visas.

'Enforcement' Approach

“We need an enforcement-first approach,” Smith said in a statement to Bloomberg News. “We should enact policies that secure the border and strengthen interior enforcement to stem the flow of illegal immigration before any discussion about legalization.”

Even with some lawmakers supporting aspects of an immigration-law rewrite, another hurdle remains: Republicans may balk at passing immigration legislation out of concerns it would be modified in talks with the Senate to include citizenship provisions.