



Column: Ag labor bill isn't perfect, but it's an improvement over status quo

U.S. Rep. Dan Newhouse

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I am honored to represent Central Washington, one of the nation's most productive agricultural areas. Here, the agriculture industry touches the lives of everyone — whether you're a farmer or rancher, a farmworker, work in a packing house or in distribution, or even when you sit down for a meal. Given the impact agriculture has on our region, ensuring the success of the industry is one of my top priorities as your representative in Congress, and it is a role that I do not take lightly.

When I talk to farmers in Central Washington, having access to a stable and legal workforce is often their No. 1 concern, which is why I joined forces with Rep. Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif., and a bipartisan coalition to craft H.R. 5038, the Farm Workforce Modernization Act.

This bill, which passed out of the House Judiciary Committee and will soon head to the House floor for a vote, was a compromise effort. Some claim that the bill does more to provide legal status to an existing workforce than to increase the availability of farmworkers available to employers; I could not disagree more. I went into these negotiations as a farmer with Central Washington's agriculture industry in my heart and mind.

This bill provides certainty to, yes, farmworkers who have spent decades in our fields harvesting food for Americans and the world, but also for farmers, who are in desperate need of a solution to the labor shortage crisis facing farms across the United States.

Washington's farmers pay the highest Adverse Effect Wage Rate in the country and are facing another 5.3% increase in 2020. This bill stabilizes the wage structure by freezing 2019 wage rates and limiting increases going forward to 3.25%. The CATO Institute indicates if this bill's wage structure had been in place for 2019, farmers would have saved at least \$324 million in wages for H-2A employees alone. Needless to say, this wage package is a clear improvement over the current system.

Modernizing the H-2A process means making it available for year-round producers, like dairy and mushroom farmers, who need access to workers for more than just a "season." This bill provides year-round access, and it goes further to streamline and simplify the H-2A application process. Employers can file a single petition — online — for the entire season, which allows for

staggered entry of workers. It also pilots a portable visa to allow employers and farmworkers to respond more dynamically to the changing labor market.

The Farm Workforce Modernization Act aims to strengthen and preserve our nation's agricultural workforce, so we can continue to boast one of the most productive agriculture industries in the world. Under this new program, experienced farmworkers make a commitment to continue working in American agriculture. This is exactly the kind of merit-based immigration reform President Trump has been calling for.

I spoke directly with President Trump about the Farm Workforce Modernization Act and the need for a solution for our farmers. He agreed: We must provide relief now. As the bill moves through the legislative process, I am committed to working with my Senate colleagues in order to send the best possible version of this bill to the president's desk for signature.

H.R. 5038 may not be the perfect bill and may not have accomplished everything I would have liked, but it will be a vast improvement for our farmers and ranchers over the status quo. This legislation is not a comprehensive solution for our nation's broken immigration system, but it is an excellent step forward for America's farms.