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Feds grant reprieve to migrant farm workers to remain in U.S. during coronavirus

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Some foreign guest workers here on agriculture visas will be allowed to extend their time in the U.S. and switch to a new employer in order to help keep the country's food supply chain humming, the Trump administration ruled Wednesday.

Usually workers here on H-2A visas are limited to three years, but Homeland Security said it will extend that period.

The guest-workers can also change jobs to work for a new employer, Homeland Security said. That's generally been a no-no for the program.

The temporary changes announced by USCIS provide the needed stability during this unprecedented crisis," said Chad F. Wolf, acting secretary at Homeland Security.

He made the announcement along with the Agriculture Department.

Mr. Wolf insisted protections for U.S. workers will remain in place.

Employers who hire H-2A workers are supposed to prove that they tried to hire Americans at market wages but were unable to find any.

American farms are increasingly dependent on H-2A workers, with the number of visas issued annually quadrupling between 2005 and 2019. They account for about 10% of all full-time agriculture jobs, according to the Cato Institute.

H-2A workers are here on legal visas.

Agriculture businesses also rely heavily on illegal immigrant labor.

Immigrant-rights activists have demanded those illegal immigrants be recognized for their work during the coronavirus crisis, both by giving them access to federal assistance checks and by later rewarding them with citizenship rights.