

# NORWALK REFLECTOR

## **Growing America; We need farm workers** Rachel Roubein

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MILAN — U.S. Rep. Marcy Kaptur, D-Ohio, on Wednesday celebrated National Farmer's Day by making a stop in Milan to advocate for ending the nation's farm labor shortage.

Kaptur visited with area farming and agricultural leaders at the Culinary Vegetable Institute on Mudbrook Road for a roundtable discussion about the problem.

On the agenda were lower food prices, keeping shelves stocked and commonsense solutions to Ohio's Farm labor shortage.

Kaptur was joined by representatives from:

- The Culinary Vegetable Institute
- Mucci Farms
- Weirs Farms
- Willoway Nurseries
- The Chef's Garden

The Milan Township-based Culinary Vegetable Institute called attention to the urgency of fixing Ohio's and the nation's farm labor shortage by passing new Senate agriculture workforce solutions.

The event was hosted to draw attention to the ongoing labor shortage that is being felt in Ohio and across the nation.

Kaptur has partnered on a national farm tour organized by the Immigration Coalition Action that, to date, has made stops in 12 states and the District of Columbia.

"I'm on the Agriculture Committee in the House of Representatives," Kaptur said. "I believe very strongly that what America makes and grows (in turn) makes and grows America. I'm here today because I'm very concerned about the trend in agriculture in this country. I want to grow food, not import food, because I want America to be secure within her border."

In 2021, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Farm Workforce Modernization Act with bipartisan support. It has since stalled in the Senate.

According to a new Cato Institute report, the House-passed Farm Workforce Modernization Act would “would reduce labor costs for H-2A farms by about \$1 billion in the first year and \$1.8 billion in the second, which would result in many more workers being hired, more productivity, and lower prices for consumers.” For Ohio farmers, this would amount to \$39.5 million in savings over two years.

Bob Jones, owner of The Chef's Garden and Farmer Jones Farm Market, the site of the Culinary Vegetable Institute, thinks the time to move is now.

“It’s quite appropriate that we’re gathered today on National Farmer’s Day. I would certainly hope that on this day next year, we’re not still lamenting that the U.S. continues to be a net importer of food,” Jones said. “We’re asking elected officials to take immediate action to give U.S. food producers the tools we need to continue providing Americans with a safe and economical food supply.”

Jones spoke about the dangers of importing food, holding particular focus on food quality.

“This comes down to a simple and basic choice for Americans. We either import workers or we import food,” Jones said. “As a country, we’re becoming a net importer of food. That doesn't bode well for national security. We must reverse that trend, because the more food we import, the less oversight our federal agencies have over it. They already inspect less than 1 percent of imported food today.”

He says the best answer is to pass the Farm Workforce Modernization Act as quickly as possible.

“The Farm Workforce Modernization Act will make significant changes to the H-2A program, will phase in e-verify, which will add integrity to hiring practices, and it also improves our chances for a more secure border. We’re asking elected officials to take immediate action to give U.S. food producers the tools we need to continue providing Americans with a safe and economical food supply.”

ABIX outreach director James O'Neill encapsulated the day's discussion by saying that this isn't a new problem, however, the problem is more urgent now than ever.

“Because of Senate inaction, we’ve seen farms changing what crops they’re growing, leaving land untilled, leaving crops to rot because they don’t have the workers to pick them, and selling their farms and leaving agriculture altogether,” O'Neill said. “This is a threat to national security, but it also comes at a cost paid by small towns that rely on farmers and by consumers, who pay more at the grocery.”

Voters in northern Ohio — including Erie, Ottawa and Sandusky counties — will decide between Kaptur and Republican challenger J.R. Majewski in the Nov. 8 election.