

Star-Telegram FORT WORTH

Sensible immigration reform for Texas

By Alex Nowrasteh

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State Sen. Eddie Lucio, D-Brownsville, and Reps. Byron Cook, R-Corsicana, and Gilbert Peña, R-Pasadena, have all proposed bills to create a guest worker program for Texas.

A Texas-based visa would allow the state to regulate migrant workers according to its own needs and cut out the feds. Regulators in D.C. don't know what's best for Texas.

Unemployment in Texas has been below the national average for eight straight years. Texas has created [413,000 jobs](#) in the last 12 months — impressive for a state of only 26 million people. Low taxes and few regulations have allowed the Texas economy to flourish.

The Mercatus Center at George Mason University [ranks](#) Texas first in labor market freedom, while [Forbes](#) praised Texas for its economic climate and growth prospects.

A Texas-based guest worker visa system would have several advantages over a one-size-fits-all national program.

The first would be flexibility. Migrants are tied to a single employer under most current federal visas, opening up the possibility of abuse and low pay.

A Texas-based migrant worker program could allow migrants to switch employers to create competition for workers, pay increases and to prevent the abuse of captive workers.

The best check on an abusive employer who underpays his employees is the ability to quit.

Texas could learn from countries that have similar policies, like Canada and Australia.

A recent Cato Institute [policy analysis](#) written by Brandon Fuller and Sean Rust argues that these provincial and state-based migration systems are created and managed based on local economic conditions — to great benefit.

The main lesson of their research is that states can react better and more quickly while the feds are often flat-footed.

Year-round migrant agricultural workers would help boost Texas agriculture.

A Texas visa for construction workers would aid the expansion of fast-growing cities.

There is an important role for the federal government in regulating migration, and that system could work alongside any new Texas-based guest worker visa.

But federal governments everywhere are insensitive to local demands. States are better suited to manage guest worker programs in addition to the federal programs.

Even immigration skeptics like Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., an immigration skeptic, acknowledge the benefits of the Canadian system. Sessions recently [stated](#) that he “had occasion to talk with the Canadian official in charge of their immigration system,” and that he “like[d] what they did.”

When Sessions and writers at Cato can come to a middle ground on immigration, Texas legislators should take note.

The Texas visa would be self-funded through fees on migrants and the employers who hire them.

Migrants are also consumers and renters who will contribute to the government budget through sales and property taxes.

There are existing bans on migrant workers receiving welfare, but these proposals go a step further, requiring them to waive all access to public benefits.

A Texas-based guest worker visa program is a federalist approach to migration suited to the state’s unique circumstances.

It’s time that Texas shows the country how to manage a migrant worker program.

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