

## **Should foreign farm workers be allowed to become citizens? GOP, Democrats disagree**

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WASHINGTON — The last time foreign farm workers got amnesty to stay in this country, many left the farms for better paying jobs.

So as the agriculture community pushes for a way to get more farm workers into the United States, it's finding not only the political obstacle — Republican lawmakers are reluctant to do much for undocumented immigrants — but also an historic one, a memory of a Reagan administration amnesty policy.

“Isn't it the case that if Congress were to again grant a special pathway to citizenship to illegal immigrant farm workers that growers would soon be left in the lurch?” asked House Judiciary Committee Chairman Robert Goodlatte, R-Va.

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Democrats are pushing for a program that would help such workers get a path to citizenship.

“Let's stop saying, ‘Oh, we can't do this program because then people are going to want to do better for themselves.’ That's America. They should be able to do better for themselves,” said Rep. Luis Gutierrez, D-III.

The dispute is another chapter in the ongoing Washington debate about immigration policy, a battle that shows no signs of ebbing — or finding common ground. Conservative Republicans insist no overhaul of the immigration system can proceed without strong border security as the first priority. While Democrats don't disagree, they also maintain a path to citizenship and security can be achieved at the same time.

Farmers say they need more workers to help bring in the harvest and there aren't enough Americans willing to do the job. They want more foreign workers.

According to data from the State Department, more than 134,000 temporary visas were issued to agricultural workers in the 2016 fiscal year, a number that has more than doubled since 2011, illustrating of the growing demand from farmers for foreign workers.

A House subcommittee Wednesday heard both sides of this debate.

“We must repair the system, both for the current workforce and in order to ensure our agricultural communities have access to the workers they desperately need for years to come,”

Rep. David Valadao, R-Calif., a dairy farmer, told the House subcommittee on immigration and border security.

Sarah Frey, president and chief executive officer of Frey Farms in Keenes, Illinois said the current H-2A visa program, which allows agricultural workers to enter the country on temporary visas, is “expensive and laden with bureaucratic inefficiency.” But she said it is still the only way her farm can get the workers they need.

Frey said many of the foreign-born farm workers do not have proper work authorization and the current crackdown on undocumented immigrants hurts the nation’s farmers.

Goodlatte is pushing a plan replace the H-2A program with a more streamlined guest worker program. He said undocumented workers currently in the U.S. would be eligible for his program but would not be given a pathway to citizenship. They could be hired alongside other foreign workers, but they would have to abide by the same rules, including returning periodically to their former home countries.

Jon Wyss, government affairs director for Gebbers Farms in Brewster, Washington, said even though his business pays higher than minimum wage, many Americans still prefer to work other jobs like retail rather than on the farm.

Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst with the conservative Cato Institute, said the benefits of having more guest workers outweigh the costs.

“More workers here from abroad mean more products for Americans to consume at a lower price, and more jobs for Americans at different stages of production,” he said.

But Democrats want that pathway to citizenship.

Rep. Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif. cited a Department of Labor report that said at least half of all farm workers in the U.S. are undocumented and said that many had been in the U.S. for more than 15 years.

“These workers came to fill critical needs and many of our constituents are still in business because those workers came,” she said. “There is no acceptable solution that fails to deal with this reality.”

Lofgren and Gutierrez are pushing a bill that would allow farm workers to apply for a “Blue Card” that would give them legal status and work authorization. They would have to pay a fine and pass a background check, but the program would also create a three to five-year pathway to citizenship.