

Fallbrook Tea Party

Good evening, I'm Eric Larson, executive director of the San Diego County Farm Bureau. With me is Janet Kister, a Fallbrook farmer who represents San Diego and Imperial Counties on the California Farm Bureau board of Directors

Who is Farm Bureau?

Agriculture in San Diego County

\$1.5 billion

\$4.5 billion in economic value

Concentrated in North County

The top 5 crops

Nursery & floral

Avocados

Tomatoes

Lemons

Herbs

Why want farming?

Contribution to the economy

Open spaces

Hedge against urban expansion

Air quality

Availability of local products

Fire suppression

California

#1 farming state in the nation (Iowa #2 at \$21 billion)

\$35 billion

The top 5 crops

Milk

Nursery & floral

Grapes
Almonds
Lettuce

What makes San Diego and California different from much of the nation?

Specialty crops
Preponderance of family farms
Heavily dependent on hand labor

I'll be frank. The majority of farmworkers in our country are foreign born and unauthorized.

According to the National Agricultural Worker Survey, over half of farmworkers lack proper immigration status – though they show documents that appear genuine.

The farm community does not defend nor care to perpetuate the status quo.

To the contrary, agricultural leaders have actively sought a legislative solution since the mid 1990's.

Agricultural employers are willing to embrace improved immigration enforcement, so long as legal channels are sufficiently improved at the same time.

Without a concurrent practical guest-worker program, stepped-up workplace enforcement will bring about irreversible structural changes to American agricultural sectors that require significant labor. Areas like California and North County.

Without broad reform, there is no factual or rational basis to conclude that agriculture will be able to source a domestic workforce to ensure the continued production of labor-intensive crops.

Fewer and fewer Americans seek the work, a trend that began during the World War II era. Americans choose employment options other than field work on farms.

I feel safe in assuming none of you here tonight raised your children to be farmworkers.

Labor instability is now a trend in labor-intensive agriculture, due to enforcement and a lack of a native-born workforce.

We have to make a choice. Do we want foreign-born farmworkers to produce crops here or in the country of their birth? That erosion is taking place next door in Imperial County today.

Despite the vast amount of agricultural production in this country, today our nation is a net importer of fresh fruits and vegetables. How dependent do we want to be on foreign nations to produce our food? We know that oil dependency is not working out well.

For several years agricultural employers have been asking for passage of the Agricultural Job Opportunity, Benefits, and Security Act. Referred to as “AgJOBS.”

AgJOBS has been presented to Congress both as stand-alone legislation and as an integral part of comprehensive reform. To date, there has been insufficient political consensus in Washington to address the problem.

The legislation would allow aliens who can demonstrate a substantial commitment to agriculture work in the US through work experience prior to introduction of the legislation to earn legal status to remain working in agriculture while waiting for the reformation of the H-2A temporary agricultural worker program.

- ✓ To qualify for temporary resident status (called blue card status), a worker must prove performance of agricultural employment for 150 work days.

- ✓ Blue card visas would contain an electronic identification strip and biometric identifiers and be tamper-proof.
- ✓ To eventually apply for permanent residency, blue card holders must prove agricultural employment for several years after legislative enactment.
- ✓ Failure to meet work requirements or failure to pay taxes results in removal.
- ✓ Must undergo a background check and pay a fine prior to receiving blue card status.
- ✓ Workers convicted of a felony or specified misdemeanor crimes cannot participate in the program.

Let me close with the four key reasons this proposal from the farm community makes sense.

#1 – Border Security - Providing legal channels for farm workers to enter, work, and return home will free up Homeland Security resources to focus on true threats to America’s well-being.

#2 – Food Security – Failure to enact timely and meaningful immigration reform will hasten America’s reliance on foreign countries to feed us.

#3 – Labor Force Security – AgJobs will facilitate the proper documentation of the trained and trusted labor force working on America’s farms today.

#4 – Economic Security – Immigrant farm workers support American jobs. Every farmworker job supports three to four jobs in the surrounding economy. These are good jobs for Americans in packing, processing, distribution, equipment, supplies, lending, and insurance.

Thank you.

