

Statement of

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Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security and International Law

'Protecting America's Harvest'

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I would like to thank Chairwoman Lofgren, Chairman Conyers, Ranking Member King and all the members of the committee for holding this hearing and for inviting me. My name is Arturo Rodriguez. I am the president of the United Farm Workers of America.

Today, across America the harvest season is reaching its peak. More than a million men, women and children are toiling in our nation's fields producing our fruits and vegetables, and caring for our livestock. Most Americans have the luxury to operate in ignorance or denial about how the food we eat gets on our tables. We don't stop and think about how this rich bounty comes to supermarkets. We don't reflect on why Americans pay less for their food than people in other countries. And most Americans probably can't comprehend the immigration struggles of the farm workers.

Agriculture in the United States is dependent on a hard working, dedicated, tax-paying immigrant work force. Three-quarters of all farm workers are born outside this country. Since the late 1990s, according to government statistics, at least 50 percent of farm laborers are foreigners who are not authorized to work legally in the United States. Our union's experience is also that the great majority are undocumented.

These are facts. It is time for Congress to look beyond the harsh rhetoric of the anti-immigrant lobby and their talk show bullies and recognize what everyone knows is true:

America needs these workers. Everyone in this room is directly sustained by farm laborers every day.

- If you had a glass of Florida orange juice with your breakfast this morning, it is almost certain the oranges that went into that juice were picked by unauthorized workers.
- If you had milk on your cereal, it is likely that the workers who milked the cows didn't have the right papers.

- When we sit down every day to give thanks for our many blessings, most of the food on your table has been harvested and cared for by unauthorized workers.

There is another indisputable fact: The life of a U.S. farm worker in 2010 is not an easy one. Most farm workers live in poverty, endure poor working conditions and receive no government assistance. Undocumented farm workers take jobs other American workers won't do, for pay other American workers won't accept, and under conditions other American workers won't tolerate.

Who is to blame?

- It is not the farm workers' fault that 15 states do not even provide the basic protection of workers compensation if they are injured at work.
- It is not the farm workers' fault that more than 70 years after Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act; farm workers still do not have the right to join a union to improve their wages and working conditions, except in California.
- It is not the farm workers' fault that year after year, farm labor contractors violate the laws with impunity while the growers who employ the contractors avoid any responsibility for the workers who are abused on their farms.
- It is not the farm workers' fault that Congress never acted on the recommendations of the Commission on Agricultural Workers authorized as part of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986—recommendations aimed at providing a stable, legal workforce for American agriculture.

Our society places all the risks and costs associated with a seasonal industry--featuring millions of short-term jobs--on the backs of the workers. For example, if there is a freeze, as occurred last year in Florida and thousands of workers are left without work, there is no unemployment assistance even though emergency aid is promptly extended to agricultural employers. Furthermore, if a worker is injured on the job or stiffed on payday, too often there is no real recourse. Is it any wonder that Americans don't want these jobs?

In an era of high unemployment, undocumented workers are convenient scapegoats for our nation's economic woes. Many associate high unemployment with foreigners taking away jobs from U.S. citizens. There are movements afoot to remove undocumented workers from the country.

Thus, the United Farm Workers initiated the "Take Our Jobs" campaign. We invite citizens and legal residents to apply for jobs on farms across the country to supply our homes, restaurants and workplace cafeterias (including those in our nation's capitol) with the food that fuels the people of this great nation.

Since June 24, we received 8,600 inquiries for information through our web site (www.takeourjobs.org) but only seven people have accepted jobs or have been trained for

agriculture positions. Unfortunately, seven new farm workers are not enough to make our food supply stable, reliable and of high quality.

Indeed, if we deported all undocumented farm workers here now, the government estimates U.S. agriculture would need to hire at least one million citizens or legal residents to replace the immigrant laborers. A mass deportation of agricultural workers would cause the collapse of the agricultural industry as we know it.

The UFW has proposed a bi-partisan solution to this dilemma: The Agricultural Job Opportunities, Benefits and Security Act, or “AgJOBS” bill. The bill is supported by agricultural employers, who have worked on this legislation with the UFW for a decade. Both employers and workers see this bill as a way for those who care about the industry and workers to move past blame, acknowledge past wrongs and create a new paradigm.

Because our current farm labor force is comprised of professional farm workers with essential skills needed to sustain the viability of the agricultural industry, AgJOBS would give undocumented farm workers presently here the right to earn legal status by continuing to work in agriculture. Representatives Adam Putnam and Howard Berman and Senators Diane Feinstein and Richard Lugar are the principal authors of the legislation.

Now is the time for Congress to acknowledge its role in creating the current farm labor crisis and to offer a real and lasting solution. It is time to acknowledge the dignity of the current farm labor workforce and ensure the safety and abundance of America’s food supply by passing the AgJOBS bill. A failure to do so would be both a human and economic tragedy

Thank you.