

COUNTY OF EL DORADO

330 Fair Lane
Placerville, CA 95667
(530) 621-5390
(530) 622-3645 Fax

KIM DAWSON
Clerk of the Board



BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

JOHN HIDAHL
District I
SHIVA FRENTZEN
District II
BRIAN K. VEERKAMP
District III
LORI PARLIN
District IV
SUE NOVASEL
District V

March 10, 2020

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein
331 Hart Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kamala Harris
112 Hart Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Feinstein and Harris:

On behalf of the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors, I'm writing to urge you to seek passage of the *Farm Workforce Modernization Act* (HR 5038). As you know, this important bipartisan legislation was approved last year by the full House of Representatives and is now pending before the Senate.

HR 5038 is a long-overdue reform effort designed to stabilize employment in the nation's agricultural sector by expanding work opportunities for foreign-born individuals. The bill was carefully developed over the course of many months with significant input from agricultural stakeholders and other parties. In fact, well over 300 agricultural groups are on record supporting the legislation, including numerous national organizations and a number of California-based groups, such as the California Farm Bureau Federation (CFBF).

California agriculture contributes roughly \$50 billion to the state's economy on an annual basis and supports more than 400,000 jobs. Despite the vital importance of the agricultural industry to our state, labor shortages continue to negatively impact crop production while threatening the future viability of many farms. According to a 2019 survey conducted by CFBF, 56 percent of California farmers in the preceding five years were unable to find the laborers they needed for the production of their primary crop. The findings show that California farming operations continue to see a negative trend in employee availability, resulting in more challenges and the likelihood of tough business decisions in the future.

To help address the labor-shortage crisis, HR 5038 would establish a first-of-its-kind, merit-based visa program for the nation's agricultural sector. Pursuant to the bill, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) would be authorized to grant temporary "Certified Agricultural Worker" (CAW) status to undocumented individuals who, in turn, would be eligible to earn permanent legal status for themselves and their dependent family members through continued agricultural employment. An individual's CAW status would be valid for five and a half years and could be extended by DHS.

Additionally, the legislation would make much-needed reforms to the H-2A agricultural guest worker visa program, including allowing a limited number of program participants to engage in year-round work. The H-2A program, which is designed to provide a legal pathway for seasonal employees, remains highly underutilized and is often unworkable for small growers.

HR 5038 also would require DHS to establish a nationwide system for employers to verify an individual's identity and employment authorization (known as E-Verify). Employers hiring individuals for agricultural employment would be required to use the new system.

Finally, the bill includes several important housing-related provisions, including language permanently authorizing the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Housing Preservation and Revitalization Program, which provides financing assistance for rural rental housing and off-farm labor housing projects. The legislation also would authorize USDA to provide other types of assistance to qualified individuals, including funding for insuring loans and grants for new farmworker housing.

Again, the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors strongly urges you to seek passage of the bipartisan *Farm Workforce Modernization Act*.

Sincerely,

Brian K. Veerkamp
Chair, El Dorado County Board of Supervisors

cc: Majority Leader Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader Charles Schumer
Senator Lindsey Graham, Chairman, Committee on the Judiciary
Senator Pat Roberts, Chairman, Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry
Senator Debbie Stabenow, Ranking Member, Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, & Forestry
Graham Knaus, CSAC Executive Director