

Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),
Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee,
On The Introduction
Of the Agricultural Job Opportunities, Benefits, And Security Act Of 2009
May 14, 2009

Once again I am pleased to join Senator Feinstein to introduce the Agricultural Job Opportunities, Benefits, and Security Act (AgJOBS). Senator Feinstein has been pursuing these important reforms for several years now, and I commend her dedication to this legislation, and to America's farmers. I join her and the other cosponsors of this legislation in strong support of America's agricultural industry and the men and women who work hard every day to keep our farms running.

In Vermont, as in many States across the country, farmers are feeling the effects of a scarce labor pool. This problem is particularly acute for the dairy industry, where the employment needs are year-round and require a significant investment from the farmer in terms of training and development. I have long been concerned about the dairy farmers' difficulties in trying to use the agricultural visa program. It simply makes no sense that the visa program dedicated to agriculture cannot be used by such an important arm of the industry.

I have long advocated for the dairy-specific provisions in the AgJOBS bill. I worked to include these protections for dairy farmers during Congress's last two debates on comprehensive reform, and it is time for the immigration law to accommodate the legitimate needs of the Nation's dairy farmers. The AgJOBS bill will change this. It would give dairy farmers needing workers the opportunity to lawfully hire foreign workers who can remain with their employers for a meaningful period of time.

The AgJOBS legislation contains other important reforms that will help all of America's farmers. The creation of a blue card for undocumented agricultural workers who have been working to keep our farms running and fields planted and harvested is the right thing to do. It is a targeted and limited proposal that will serve to help farmers and farm workers. I have said before that no American farmer should be forced to choose between his or her livelihood and obeying the law. In Vermont it is estimated that as many as 2000 undocumented workers work on dairy farms in the State. And we can all agree that this is not an ideal situation--not for the farmer and not for the worker, and not for an overall immigration system that is in need of substantial repair.

By providing a mechanism for loyal undocumented foreign workers to come out of the shadows and into the sunlight of the protection of the law and the rights it will provide them, Congress can help begin a new day in American

agriculture. No longer will farmers endure the waste and heartbreak of watching fields of crops rot for lack of workers to harvest. Workers will be able to contribute lawfully and openly to our Nation's agricultural industry, and integrate into their surrounding communities, adding to the fabric of our diverse American life. The need for this legislation is clear and present, and I hope that some who have stood in opposition to sensible immigration reform will recognize that hardworking farmers and their communities are as much the victims of their misguided obstructionism as are the immigrants they seek to punish. We will need the strong support in the Senate and from the Obama administration if we are to make these and other reforms to our immigration system. President Obama recognized the need for this legislation as a Senator when he was an original cosponsor last Congress. His leadership will be critical as we move forward.

Our bill contains other sensible provisions concerning the rights of workers, fair wages, and a streamlined process for farmers using the H-2A process. These are all important reforms that I am proud to support. Senator Feinstein is committed to the Nation's farmers and those who work for them, and I am pleased to join her in support of these needed reforms.

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