June 20, 2011

**Immigration enforcement without workable programs to address the labor needs of the farm sector will harm the economy and jeopardize American jobs.**

The ongoing enforcement-only approach to immigration policy, including disruptive I-9 audits and state-by-state mandates, is already harming American farms, food production, jobs, and the economy. As Congress begins to debate making the E-Verify program mandatory, lawmakers must act to ensure a legal and stable farm labor supply.

Without a workable program to address the labor needs of fruit, vegetable, dairy and nursery farms and ranches, many U.S. farmers and their farm employees will lose their livelihoods. If there is no one to pick the crop, industry sectors that operate upstream and downstream of farm production and harvest will be adversely impacted as well.

Each of the 1.6 million hired farm employees who work in labor intensive agriculture supports 2 to 3 full-time American jobs in the food processing, transportation, farm equipment, marketing, retail and other sectors. Mandatory E-Verify without workable labor solutions for agriculture puts these American jobs, and the economies of communities across the country, in jeopardy.

Furthermore, if there is no one to pick the crop, then nothing else matters, not food safety, nor research, nor market access programs! Production will move out of the country, leaving the U.S. reliant on other nations for our food. Already, U.S. fruit and vegetable imports from China have increased 555% over ten years! This is the future, unless Congress acts wisely.

Implementation of nationwide E-Verify must include a workable farm labor program for the future, and include provisions to retain current experienced workers and managers in agriculture. The current H-2A program is irrevocably broken, and incapable of addressing current and future labor needs of agriculture.

The numbers across the nation are as follows:

- There are about 1.6 million farm workers in labor intensive agriculture. The labor of each supports at least 2 to 3 good year-around American jobs in processing, transportation, supplying inputs, marketing, etc.
• Upwards of 75% of these essential farm workers are believed to be unauthorized to work in the U.S. Even during the “great recession,” few Americans chose to apply for farm jobs, many of which are seasonal or intermittent. "There are simply not enough Americans willing to do, to take the jobs of migrant farm workers. In fact, our government's policy for generations has been to remove Americans from such labor." (House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration Policy and Enforcement chairman Elton Gallegly, May 14, 2011).

• H.R.2164, legislation being considered in the House Judiciary Committee, purports to address agriculture’s needs, but it does not. Rather, it perpetuates an uncertain and increasingly chaotic status quo for several years. It does not solve the problem.

• The only legal agricultural worker program (H-2A) supplies roughly 60,000 seasonal workers each year, only two to three percent of farm employers’ needs. The program has descended into chaos, with arbitrary delays and denials leading to workers not showing up when they are needed. Even with substantial improvements, H-2A alone cannot solve the problem.

• Growers and producers cannot maintain a business model and make investments for the future based the unpredictability and the crushing and confusing regulatory burdens of H-2A. Faced with loss of their experienced workers, growers will adjust by scaling back, shifting to less labor-intensive crops, or ceasing to farm in the U.S. altogether.

• Enactment of mandatory E-Verify, without provisions to allow current field workers and managers to keep working, will deprive farms of most of the labor force, resulting in a shortfall of one million or more experienced workers. Even with major reform of the H-2A program, the U.S. government could not supply the volume of workers needed.

• The question facing Congress is this: will positive legislative action be taken to address the crisis? If not, labor-intensive agriculture will decline, farms will close, American jobs and economic activity will be exported, much of our food production will be outsourced to other countries, and we will rely on foreign countries to feed us.

A workable farm labor program to retain current experienced farm workers and ensure future workers must be part of any legislation addressing immigration enforcement. History has demonstrated the power of a widely used farm labor program in curbing illegal immigration. Creating a modern, market-oriented program now is part of securing the border. Congress must provide U.S. farmers with a mechanism to access and employ a legal labor force, help to assure America’s food security, and preserve the millions of other jobs that depend on American agriculture.