

## Farewell to AgJOBS

I've come to a realization in the last few weeks: AgJOBS is toast.

I can't say with 100 percent certainty that, in its current form, the Agricultural Job Opportunities, Benefits and Security Act is dead. I can only say it with 90 percent certainty.

In the May issue of FGN, I wrote a brief history of the last 50 years in immigration and agricultural labor ("Hiring farm workers more complicated than ever," page 29). Near the end of that story I gave an update on AgJOBS, a legislative proposal that sought to remedy U.S. agriculture's labor dilemma – a dilemma that can be summed up like this: The vast majority of Americans aren't willing to do farm work anymore; those who *are* doing it are probably illegal and could get thrown out of the country at any time.



**Matt Milkovich**  
Managing Editor

The goal of AgJOBS was twofold: To reform the tattered H-2A guest-worker program and legalize the immigration status of experienced ag workers.

AgJOBS has languished in Congress for nearly a decade.

In the story mentioned above, I quoted Jack King, a California Farm Bureau Federation manager, who said Congressional backers are considering pushing a different version of AgJOBS this year, something more temporary. He didn't say anything about pushing the original bill. Neither did anybody else.

AgJOBS didn't get much respect May 24, either, during a teleconference with USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack and American Farm Bureau Federation President Bob Stallman. Both men were pushing the need for comprehensive immigration reform.

I asked them to explain the advantage of a comprehensive approach over an agriculture-only approach such as AgJOBS. Vilsack said the Obama administration prefers to have one set of rules when it comes to immigration and labor enforcement. The system should be consistent, predictable and understandable for everyone involved. That rules out a separate set of standards for agriculture, even though he pointed out ag's unique labor needs (which kind of confused me).

Stallman called AgJOBS a good idea that "didn't go far enough." The act was originally intended to be a short-term solution, a temporary salve for ag employers and workers that eventually would be rolled into a comprehensive reform program, he said.

That's interesting, because according to some of the people I interviewed for the 50-year story, there are dangers in attaching agriculture's immigration reform needs to a comprehensive approach. It's been tried before and hasn't worked. You could say ag got dragged down by baggage from other industries.

Then again, ag hasn't had any luck pushing for reform on its own.

Whatever your preference, it looks like we're going to try the comprehensive approach again. President Obama recently called for a "civil and constructive" national debate on immigration reform, and, as mentioned above, his administration is pushing a comprehensive solution. As far as I can tell, he hasn't said anything about AgJOBS.

### No more labor data

Speaking of labor, USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) announced in May that it would discontinue its Agricultural Labor Survey program due to budget restrictions.

What does that mean? Well, the Agricultural Labor Survey provided quarterly statistics on the number of agricultural workers, their hours worked and wage rates. The number of workers and hours worked statistics were used to estimate agricultural productivity, while wage rate stats were used in the administration of the H-2A program and for setting Adverse Effect Wage Rates. All that data will no longer be collected, unless there's a change in the anticipated budget shortfall, according to NASS.

# FGN

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USPS 576-420, ISSN 1533-6840

PERIODICAL POSTAGE PAID AT SPARTA, MI AND ADDITIONAL OFFICE

Published monthly by Great American Publishing Inc.  
Office at 75 Applewood Dr., Suite A, Sparta, Michigan 49345.

### POSTMASTER

Send address changes to:

Fruit Growers News

P.O. Box 128, Sparta, Michigan 49345.

Phone: 616-887-9008, Fax: 616-887-2666

Canada Post: Publications Mail Agreement #40612608

Canada Returns to be sent to Bleuchip International

P.O. Box 25542, London, ON N6C 6B2

### SUBSCRIPTION RATES

United States: \$32 per 3 years, \$14 per year

Canada: \$56 per year, Foreign Countries: \$100 per year

BACK ISSUES \$6 each



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