

Farm Group Seeks Immigration Changes

By [RON NIXON](#)

FEB. 10, 2014

WASHINGTON — Immigration reform that focuses solely on enforcement would cut agriculture production and cause a sharp rise in food prices, according to a study released Monday.

The [study](#) — which was commissioned by the American Farm Bureau, the nation's largest farm lobby organization — said food prices would increase an additional 5 percent to 6 percent over the next five years if enforcement-only policies were put into place, because of a lack of workers to harvest crops. It would cost the agriculture sector as much as \$60 billion over the same period.

The study comes as Congress and the Obama administration are debating immigration overhaul proposals that would address the country's estimated 11 million unauthorized workers.

Republican leaders had put forward a modest immigration reform proposal, but many Tea Party activists and conservatives in Congress have opposed all plans that offer amnesty for those in the country illegally. Because of the opposition, Speaker John A. Boehner of Ohio [said](#) last week that it was unlikely that an immigration reform bill could pass the House this year.

According to the report, the hardest-hit domestic food sectors under an enforcement-only proposal would be fruit production, which would plummet by 30 percent to 61 percent, and vegetable production, which would decline by 15 percent to 31 percent. Fruit and vegetables are labor intensive sectors because most of the crops must be picked by hand.

The study also found that livestock production, which also depends on immigrant labor, would fall by 13 percent to 37 percent.

The Department of Agriculture's main focus is on changing the H-2A visa program, which allows fruit and vegetable growers, slaughterhouses and other agribusinesses to hire temporary workers for jobs that cannot be filled by Americans. The system allows foreign workers to enter the country on a visa for no longer than one year.

But agriculture officials say the current system does not work because industries like [dairy farming](#) and meat production are year-round enterprises and are unable to fill their need for workers. They also say the program is overly bureaucratic. Among the changes the farm sector wants to see is the replacement of the seasonal visa program with one that would allow workers to accept a job under a three-year visa.

The Farm Bureau's report found that legislation that included these changes would have little to no effect on food prices, and the impact on farm income would be less than 1 percent.

“Status quo is not a viable option for anyone involved in this issue, and as a nation, we expect better,” said Bob Stallman, president of the Farm Bureau.

“Over five years, an enforcement-only approach would lead to losses in farm income large enough to trigger large-scale restructuring of the sector, higher food prices and greater dependence on imported products,” Mr. Stallman said.

The farm sector has been a core constituency of the Republican Party for many years. In the 2012 presidential election, farm-heavy districts voted overwhelmingly for Mitt Romney, the Republican nominee.

Tom Nassif, president of the [Western Growers](#), and Chuck Conners, president of the [National Council of Farmer Cooperatives](#), two of the organizations pushing for immigration legislation, were advisers to Mr. Romney during the campaign.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/11/us/politics/farm-bureau-report-finds-need-for-immigration-overhaul.html>