

# Guest: Why Washington's farms need immigration reform

By [Mike LaPlant](#)

ACCORDING to conventional wisdom, elected officials avoid controversial issues in election years. So far this year, our political leaders in Washington, D.C., have lived up to those expectations. Posturing between U.S. House Republicans, the Democratic Senate and the White House has again revealed how difficult and frustrating the perennial issue of immigration reform can be.

Recent comments by U.S. Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Spokane, and chair of the House Republican Conference, indicate that there may be a window of opportunity for getting immigration-reform legislation to the House floor by August.

Progress on immigration reform this year is critically important to agriculture, and Congress needs to focus on a path forward. Encouraging the House to pass the bipartisan Senate immigration reform bill is a nonstarter. The only way to move the issue forward in the House is for Republicans to pass their own plan.

In January, House Speaker John Boehner released immigration standards that included many key reforms that the Washington Farm Bureau believes must be advanced. Boehner deserves credit for taking this critical step toward consensus, and the state's congressional delegation should join him in this effort to move this issue forward.

Immigration reform is key to continued economic growth nationwide and locally. Washington's food and agriculture industry generates \$49 billion in revenue annually. To produce and harvest the crops that drive that economic output, farmers must have an adequate, reliable workforce.

Unfortunately, American workers are typically not interested in this line of work. Farm jobs are seasonal and require physical labor in a variety of weather conditions. According to [a study by the Partnership for a New American Economy](#), American workers do not apply for farm jobs even during periods of high unemployment.

This often leaves farmers no choice but to rely on foreign workers. Sadly, our immigration system has made it nearly impossible for farmers to use the existing H-2A visa program to hire seasonal workers. The system is bureaucratic, complex, costly and hugely inefficient.

An effective visa program would remedy labor shortages without displacing American workers, and it would actually increase the number of jobs available to Americans as agricultural output ripples through our economy. According to [the Agriculture Workforce Coalition](#), for every farm job filled, three additional jobs are created downstream in fields such as manufacturing, transportation, retail and sales.

It is time for Congress to make the agricultural visa program more efficient and market-based. U.S. Rep. Bob Goodlatte, R-Va., chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, has introduced [H.R. 1773, the Agricultural Guestworker Act](#).

The bill proposes significant improvements to the current agricultural visa program. For example, it grants guest workers the opportunity to work for more than one farmer during their visa terms. Some details, such as a more flexible cap on the number of agricultural visas issued, still need to be finalized through the legislative process.

We appreciate Rep. Goodlatte's efforts, and we will work with him and other House members to address agriculture's needs for a future flow of workers.

Lastly, meaningful immigration reform is good for national security. Our borders would be strengthened by simplifying the visa process for law-abiding people to come to America to work and then return home.

We view the release of Speaker Boehner's immigration standards and U.S. Rep. McMorris Rodgers' comments as positive developments. Those principles lay the groundwork for fruitful discussions among House members.

It is time for Washington's members of Congress to work with the speaker to turn those standards into legislation and pass it this year.

*Mike LaPlant is president of the Washington Farm Bureau, the state's largest general farm organization representing farmers and ranchers.*

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