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House Republican Expresses Support for Guest-Worker Program

By [ASHLEY PARKER](#)

Representative Robert Goodlatte, Republican of Virginia, appeared willing to carve out a sliver of middle ground on Tuesday in the debate over the future of the nation's immigration system, offering up the possibility of a guest worker program as a trial case for how the country handles both legal and illegal immigration.

At a House Judiciary subcommittee hearing on the topic of agricultural workers, Mr. Goodlatte, the chairman of the full committee, said that he could support a measure that would offer at least temporary legalization for illegal immigrants who are currently in the country working in the agriculture industry.

“A guest worker program should help farmers who are willing to pay a fair wage for law-abiding, dependable workers — not punish them,” Mr. Goodlatte said. “And for this reason I support replacing the H-2A program and implementing new policies that will bring our illegal agricultural workers out of the shadows, as a first step in the process of overhauling our nation's immigration system.”

An H-2A visa allows workers into the country to perform temporary or seasonal agricultural work. As Mr. Goodlatte acknowledged, the vast majority of farmworkers in the United States — as much as 70 percent of the farm labor force, according to growers' groups — are immigrants here illegally.

Mr. Goodlatte, a former immigration lawyer, has previously taken a hardline stance on an immigration overhaul, opposing a pathway to citizenship for the 11 million immigrants already in the country illegally. But he has also said he is open to finding some middle ground between deportation and full citizenship.

The agriculture guest worker program, he implied on Tuesday, could be a first step.

“Addressing the complex labor issues of the relatively small agriculture sector can help us understand how we can build our broader immigration laws and enforcement mechanisms in order to enhance the U.S. economy and make our immigration laws more efficient and fair for all involved,” he said.

Visas for lower-skilled workers have proved a divisive issue in past immigration debates, pitting the business community — which favors allowing guest workers into the country to help employers fulfill their labor needs — against the labor community, which worries that immigrant workers could depress wages and take away jobs from Americans. But last week, [labor and business groups jointly called for a visa system](#) that would meet labor market demands while protecting American workers.

The tone of Tuesday's subcommittee hearing was far less heated than a full-committee hearing on broad immigration proposals earlier this month, and several members expressed optimism that, at least on this topic, an agreement could be reached.

Still, some House Republicans remained hesitant about the logistics of reforming the temporary worker program. Representative Lamar Smith, Republican of Texas, said that a "true" guest worker program would have to be a "short" guest worker program, seeming to rule out the possibility of any form of legalization for the workers. And Representative Steve King, Republican of Iowa, suggested a program that would "bond" workers; employers, he explained, would be forced to post a bond of sorts — much like the bond system in criminal court — to ensure that their workers would ultimately return home.

"I'm going to guess from the look on your face that you haven't discussed that," Mr. King said, shortly after making the suggestion.

On Wednesday, the subcommittee is set to look at the record of the E-Verify program, the current tool to help employers determine the legal status of newly hired workers.

<http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/02/26/house-republican-expresses-support-for-guest-worker-program/>