



Durbin At Hearing On Need For Path To Citizenship For Immigrant Farmworkers

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WASHINGTON – U.S. Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin (D-IL), Chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, today delivered an opening statement during the Senate Judiciary Committee hearing entitled “Immigrant Farmworkers are Essential to Feeding America.” The hearing will examine the essential contributions of immigrant farmworkers to our food supply and highlight the need for the Senate to take up legislation to provide a path to citizenship for undocumented farmworkers.

“During this pandemic, we’ve all been forced to face the reality that our food supply chain depends to a great extent on the labor of immigrants. At every step of the food

production process—from the moment a crop is planted, to the moment our grocery bags are handed to us—there is an immigrant worker who plays a critical role in feeding our families.”

“Their work is essential. And it is never easy. Our nation’s farms, factories, and food processing plants can also be dangerous.”

“Over the past year, the workers who kept our grocery store shelves stocked have endured immense hardship. The pandemic has torn through our nation’s factories—as well as our farms—because, in these workplaces, social distancing is not an option.”

“All of these factors have led to a devastating outcome: more than half-a-million agricultural workers have contracted COVID-19. And, during the first year of the pandemic, more than 7,000 farmworkers died of COVID-19.”

“Sadly, the coronavirus is just one of many workplace hazards these workers face. They handle dangerous machinery. They experience repetitive strain injuries. They’re regularly exposed to pesticides. And now we see in our Western states, they face sweltering heat. In fact, farmworkers are 35 times more likely than the average worker to die from heat exposure.”

“Many of them face another risk—one that is the direct result of our broken immigration system: the threat of deportation. About half of our nation’s 2.5 million farmworkers are undocumented. These workers head out to the field every morning to pick the fruits and vegetables that feed our families. But despite this essential work, they are at risk of being separated from their families.”

“We—in this Senate—can change that. We can pass legislation that will not only keep hard-working families like Vicente’s together—but strengthen the durability and resilience of our food chain.”

“Earlier this year, the House passed the *Farm Workforce Modernization Act* on a bipartisan basis. This landmark legislation is the product of an historic agreement between farmers and farmworkers. It would fundamentally change the lives of hundreds of thousands of farmworkers who came to our rescue during the darkest days of the pandemic. And it would allow them to continue doing their essential work without fear of deportation.”

“Our farms—and the communities surrounding them—are some of our nation’s greatest assets. Let’s enact policies that help them to survive—and thrive. When we debate

legislation like the *Farm Workforce Modernization Act*, what we're really debating is the future of America and particularly rural America. Let's invest in that future with hardworking, good people."

During today's hearing, Durbin asked Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack to reflect on the state of agriculture in Secretary Vilsack's home state of Iowa as it relates to the issue of immigrant farmworkers.

"We have a witness in the next panel, Linnea Kooistra—thank you for being here—she's from a dairy family. And I've had dairy farmers tell me that unless you're lucky enough to have a bunch of kids who want to hang around a farm, by and large you need workers to come in to milk those cows twice a day to keep the dairy farm operating. Same thing is true in the orchards of southern Illinois... have you seen the same thing in Iowa and other parts of the nation?" Durbin asked.

Secretary Vilsack said that he has seen similar worker shortages across the country and that it is clear that this industry relies on immigrant workers.

Durbin also questioned the second panel on the need for the Senate to take up legislation to provide a path to citizenship for undocumented farmworkers. Those panelists included Mr. Arturo S. Rodríguez, President Emeritus, United Farm Workers of America; Mr. Shay Myers, CEO and Farmer, Owyhee Produce, Ontario, Oregon; and Leon R. Sequeira, Former Assistant Secretary of Labor for Policy.

Arturo Rodríguez, President Emeritus of United Farm Workers of America, explained what passage of the *Farm Workforce Modernization Act* would mean to the undocumented immigrant farmworkers in America today and how this legislation would benefit the agriculture industry.

"The reality is we have worked very hard with the ag industry, as well as with Republicans and Democrats, especially in these last few years in trying to develop the *Farm Workforce Modernization Act* to ensure that in fact those workers that are working here today in agriculture will continue working in agriculture for years to come," Mr. Rodríguez said.

Video of Durbin's opening statement is available [here](#).

Video of Durbin's questions to Secretary Vilsack in Committee is available [here](#).

Video of Durbin's questions to Mr. Rodríguez, Mr. Myers, and Mr. Sequeira in Committee is available [here](#).