

June 19, 2013

The Honorable Bob Goodlatte
Chairman, Committee on the Judiciary
2138 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

CC: Judiciary Committee Members

Dear Chairman Goodlatte:

We, the undersigned faith leaders, write to oppose H.R. 1773, the Agricultural Guestworker Act.

Faith communities across the nation share a belief in the God given dignity of all people, concern for the vulnerable, and biblical mandates to “love our neighbor as ourselves”, and to “welcome the stranger”. Upholding those beliefs, we have made comprehensive immigration reform that includes a humane legalization program a priority. Your legislation provides no pathway to citizenship for hardworking farm workers who are the backbone of our agricultural economy.

Rather, your legislation creates an agricultural guest worker only program, replacing the existing H-2A program with a new H-2C program. This proposed H-2C program eliminates hard fought protections won for guest workers in the years following the infamous Bracero program. And it adds new burdens for those workers who come here to feed us. For just one example, the program would not only lower already meager wages, but then calls for 10% of those wages to be withheld from the farm workers’ paychecks. In order to apply for a return of their earnings, H-2C workers would be required to travel to a US consulate in their homeland and demonstrate compliance with the terms of the program. Consequently, H-2C workers will labor in fear of being fired and thus “out of compliance”, which will deter them from challenging unfair or illegal employer practices. Were any willing to make such a challenge, federal legal aid programs would be barred from assisting them.

Additionally, the program makes no provisions for the accompaniment of family members. Together with the lack of opportunity for citizenship, your bill would further the separation of families, disrupting a basic human need and causing greater suffering in our communities.

Our nation needs a strong, stable and committed agricultural workforce that is treated with dignity and respect. Toward that end, the Senate bill, S.744, includes a historic compromise agreement carefully negotiated by agribusiness and farm worker representatives, which embraces a path to citizenship for current farm workers and their families, and provides a legal and safe pathway for future workers.

We ask you to respect this agricultural agreement facilitated by a bi-partisan group of Senators, and to withdraw this divisive bill that, includes no path to citizenship, greatly reduces protections for guest workers, and disrupts progress on fixing our broken immigration system.

Respectfully,

*Kathryn Mary Lohre
President, National Council of Churches*

Re: Opposition to Agricultural Guestworker Act

*The Rev. Mark S. Hanson
Presiding Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*

*Linda Hartke
President and CEO, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service*

*Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins
President and General Minister
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the US and Canada*

*Rev. Ron Degges
President, Disciples Home Missions
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the US and Canada*

*Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski
Archbishop of Miami, FL*

*Bishop John C. Wester
Catholic Bishop of Salt Lake City, UT*

*Bishop Gerald Kicanas
Catholic Bishop of Tucson, AZ*

*Bishop Armando Ochoa
Catholic Bishop of Fresno, CA*

*Carol Blythe
President, Alliance of Baptists*

*Paula Clayton Dempsey
Minister for Partnership Relations, Alliance of Baptists*

*Jim Winkler
General Secretary, General Board of Church and Society, United Methodist Church*

*Rev. M. Linda Jaramillo
Executive Minister, Justice and Witness Ministries, United Church of Christ*

*Rev. George Reed
Executive Director, North Carolina Council of Churches*