The Farm Bill and Workforce Solutions

Our workforce needs are getting harder to meet. According to our 2022 Greenhouse and Nursery Employment Survey, over two-thirds of survey respondents indicated they could not hire all the employees they wanted during 2021. Investments in technology development, adaptation, and farm-level adoption of automated and/or mechanized production management tools will improve specialty crop growers’ productivity and competitiveness through enhanced efficiency. Workforce shortages have many growers considering the H-2A program, but a lack of sufficient and quality farm worker housing options is a major barrier. Growers need access to programs and resources to assist with housing requirements. Additional resources and flexibilities for farm worker housing assistance programs in the Rural Development title are necessary.

Priority: Additional R&D funding for mechanization and support for adapting and adopting labor-saving technology will help our industry navigate the ongoing workforce challenges.

Crop diversity among nursery and greenhouse producers varies wildly, with thousands of types of plants grown in a variety of production settings, resulting in similarly diverse operational production needs. Automation and mechanization research, development, and technology transfer are inherently slow, complex, and expensive, exceeding the capacity of individual producers to effect change. The Farm Bill can leverage strategic investments to help U.S. producers survive and thrive.

**Standalone Mechanization Program (Title VII, Research):**
*Policy Recommendation* – Congress should allocate $20 million in mandatory annual spending to establish a new standalone program, the Mechanization and Automation Accelerated Research and Development Program (MAPS), that prioritizes mechanization and automation for specialty crops. This proposed program would be managed following an SCRI-like governance structure and relevance and evaluation process guided by industry input.

By prioritizing this research and creating a new program using the existing structure, USDA and the industry can move quickly to deploy the funding and see projects begin.

Priority: Enhance programs that help producers with costs for the housing of agricultural workers.

Adequate, affordable housing is key to retaining a farm workforce, and is a regulatory requirement for H-2A program participation. However, housing is often unavailable and requires major capital investment to build or acquire. The Rural Development Title has several programs that growers can access to help pay for the construction or the rental of farm worker housing on and off-farm.

**Off-Farm Labor Housing Loans and Grants (Title VI, Rural Development):**
*Policy Recommendation* – Congress should prioritize off-farm housing for all work-authorized residents, including temporary workers (H-2A, etc.).

Construction, improvement, repair, and purchase of housing for domestic farm laborers is the primary objective of this program. H-2A workers are not eligible under the law for off-farm housing built with USDA assistance, as tenant eligibility is limited to the domestic farm worker to only include a citizen of the United States.