

IMMIGRATION REFORM & AGRICULTURAL LABOR POLICY STATEMENT

as of January 10, 2018

Core Principle

Support a bipartisan immigration fix that addresses a long-standing need—that is in crisis now—for production agriculture including winegrapes.

Issue

The Washington wine industry is threatened by a shortage of skilled agricultural workers. Intense competition with other agricultural crops for seasonal workers lack of interest by the local workforce, aggressive federal enforcement of illegal immigration policies, frequent incompatibilities associated with use of the H-2A guest worker program, and the geographical distance between Washington and Mexico, have resulted in reduced availability of skilled vineyard and cellar workers.

Many winegrape growers depend on seasonal immigrant labor, but the current federal guest worker program, the H-2A Temporary Agricultural Workers visa program, is not feasible for nearly 98% of industry employers. Additionally, an increasing state minimum wage is becoming cost-prohibitive for smaller industry employers. It is imperative that any new state regulations and policies regarding agricultural labor do not create additional obstacles and costs for hiring skilled workers.

Rationale

Agricultural work, including planting, pruning, harvesting winegrapes, as well as some cellar work, differs from other work done by guest workers because:

- its requirements are seasonal;
- it is located in mostly rural areas;
- its workers are highly mobile; and
- the products are perishable.

The existing H-2A visa program has requirements, including providing housing and transportation for immigrant workers and payment of surety bonds, that prevent the program from being feasible for small winegrape growers and winery operators.

During the past few years, Congress has proposed a number of possible solutions to the existing guest worker program. These have included a proposal for mandatory use of an electronic employment eligibility verification system and a new category of visa program (H-2C) for agricultural workers.

While Congress pursues changes to the guest worker program, it is imperative that the state of Washington does not establish new legislative requirements that adversely impact the winegrape industry by worsening the existing agricultural labor shortages.