

Statement of Linnea Kooistra, Farm Business Owner and Partner of Kooistra Farms

U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee

July 21, 2021

Good morning Chair Durbin, Ranking Member Grassley, and Members of the Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Linnea Kooistra. I am a farmer in Woodstock IL. My family roots in farming extend back over ten generations in this country. My husband Joel and I were dairy farmers for over forty years, and we were both raised on dairy farms.

Dairy farming has evolved over the years but the things that have stayed the same are the need for daily care and feeding of the animals, and the stewardship of the land. Years ago, labor was largely provided by family with maybe one hired employee. As dairy herds increased in size, hired labor became a critical part of our business.

My husband and I had about 300 cows and 250 young animals to care for and milk every day. We had three full time employees and two part time employees. Right around the year 2000, we switched to an immigrant workforce. We had been having a lot of frustration with our labor pool. It was very hard to find employees willing to be here at 4 in the morning to milk cows. Our day started at 4 and finished about 7 pm, seven days a week. Having a dedicated workforce is essential.

After switching to an immigrant workforce our lives became much easier. Our people were loyal, dedicated workers. If one person was sick, we could call another at the last minute, and they would be here, even on their day off. They were excellent with the cattle, eager to learn, hard-working, and honest. They were also highly skilled and well trained. Working on a dairy farm requires veterinary and computer skills, following protocols to ensure milk quality, animal health and well-being, and maintenance and repair of equipment. We were extremely proud of our team.

Our decision to sell the cows in 2018 was in part because we were worried about losing our workforce. The atmosphere regarding immigrants in the workforce was hostile. We knew we could not run this business without them, and at our age, we decided to sell the cows. This was a very difficult decision for us after a career doing what we loved.

I am here to tell you how essential these workers are to ALL dairy farmers, and critical to our nation's food supply. 51% of the labor on dairy farms is from immigrants. The dairy farms that employ immigrant labor produce 79% of the U.S. milk supply. These are not jobs that are displacing other workers. Again, I ran my dairy farm with my husband for over 40 years, and I can decisively say that the domestic workers just aren't there, even with good pay and benefits.

We provided good wages, paid vacation, as well as health insurance and a small life insurance policy to our employees, and still we could not get workers, until we expanded our workforce to include immigrants.

Our dairy farmer friends are telling us that the situation has gotten worse since we left the industry. They are in crisis mode today. The situation has become very dire. People are working double shifts. They have had to cancel days off. People are working to the point of exhaustion which has an impact on quality of the work. We all know that when you are tired you make more mistakes. The farm families and their dedicated employees are sacrificing a great deal because there are just not enough workers to serve the labor needs on farms. I am worried about the toll on their physical and mental health. They are desperate.

Dairy farmers are resilient. They are creative problem solvers. But they cannot fix this problem. Only you can fix it.

On a dairy farm, you cannot just close the door for a few days because you don't have help. You can't decide to slow down production because you don't have help. Cows need to be milked, at least twice a day, every day. They need to be fed and cared for every day. Farmers are responsible for their wellbeing, as well as operating a business.

This labor shortage will not go away after the Covid-19 recovery. This is an ongoing issue that continues to get worse every day. The urgency of the workforce crisis cannot be overstated. Dairy farmers are in an especially difficult spot because they cannot supplement their workforce with H-2A employees. H-2A visas do not work for dairy farms because we need qualified year-round employees. Small farms will continue to exit the industry if they cannot get help. Larger farms have even a greater need for a dependable hired labor force.

I am here to plead with you to help the industry that I love, but I know there are many segments of our agricultural economy that also rely on immigrants. I am here because I want to help my friends who are dairy farmers and are up against the wall. One farmer told me they are starting to think about robotic milkers, but he says the cost is astronomical and he does not know how he can pay for it with his 500 cows. If the U.S. Dairy industry lost its foreign born workforce, it would nearly double retail milk prices and cost the U.S. economy more than \$32 billion, according to a study by Texas A & M University.

These are the choices. Do we want our food produced in this country where we have the safest food supply in the world? The ag labor crisis on our farms is an issue of national security that must be addressed, and it must be addressed now. This requires two critical reforms.

First, we must protect our current workers. The current workers on dairy farms deserve the chance to work toward citizenship. They are critical to our nation's food supply. We cannot do this without them. They are honest, reliable, dedicated, good human beings. Many have been

working here for decades, have raised their families, and are vital members of their community. Like farmers, their income stays local, turning over several times in support of local businesses.

Second, we must reform H-2A so dairy farmers have real access to a legal agricultural guestworker program. The bipartisan Farm Workforce Modernization Act (FWMA) passed by the House of Representatives provides both current worker protections and H-2A reforms. Under the bill, our current agricultural workers would have the chance to stay and work on farms through an earned requirement, which benefits farmers *and* our current, trained labor force. FWMA would also reform H-2A in important ways, including giving dairy and other year-round producers limited access to the program. Both of these components are essential to addressing the ag labor crisis.

Please come together on a bipartisan basis as the House did and reform our immigration policies, so that today and into the future we can continue to feed our nation with a reliable workforce and have a safe, abundant, and dependable food supply.