



**Written Testimony of National Pork  
Producers Council President Jen  
Sorenson**

**On  
“Immigrant Farmworkers are  
Essential to Feeding America”**

**Before the  
Senate Judiciary Committee**

**July 21, 2021**

## **Introduction**

Chairman Durbin, Ranking Member Grassley, and members of the committee, I appreciate the opportunity to discuss an issue of critical importance for U.S. pork producers and all of U.S. livestock agriculture. My name is Jen Sorenson. I am the communications director for Iowa Select Farms in West Des Moines, Iowa, and president of the National Pork Producers Council (NPPC), a national association representing the interests of more than 60,000 U.S. pork producers.

The U.S. pork industry supports more than 500,000 domestic jobs, generates more than \$39 billion in gross national product, and exports an increasing volume of product, which in 2020 was valued at more than \$7.7 billion.

U.S. hog farmers are proud to provide an affordable and nutritious source of protein to consumers at home and around the globe. Unfortunately, the U.S. pork industry is suffering from a serious labor shortage, negatively impacting farms and processing plants. This challenge undermines a critical economic sector that in recent years has driven employment and wage growth faster than the overall economy and is key to prosperity in rural America.

## **The Situation**

As any pork producer will tell you, there is no pork season. U.S. pork production is a seven-days-a-week, 365-days-a-year effort. It requires a hardworking and dedicated workforce on our farms and in processing plants.

There is an increasing need for employees throughout the pork supply chain, but there has been a steady decline in rural population growth, where most farms and harvest facilities are located. This has resulted in a labor shortage for U.S. hog farmers and harvest facility operators. Statistics suggest pork industry wages average approximately \$14.75/hour across the country, including many rural areas where the local minimum wage is much lower. However, despite solid wages and benefits, according to a study by economists with Iowa State University, native-born workers and permanent residents cannot offset the need for foreign-born labor. As a result, the U.S. pork industry is highly dependent on foreign-born employees who make tremendous contributions in their jobs and communities.

Current visa programs designed for seasonal agriculture—such as the H-2A visa—fail to meet the workforce needs of U.S. pork producers and other year-round livestock farmers.

The H-2A visa program, created in 1987 under the Immigration Reform and Control Act, allows a foreign national entry into the United States for temporary or seasonal agricultural work. Terms of work can be as short as one month and as long as ten months. Additionally, to be eligible for the H-2A program, employers must demonstrate a lack of U.S. workers who are able, willing and qualified for the jobs. While the H-2A visa program has helped some agricultural sectors, U.S. pork production and other livestock farming is not seasonal, and thus is ineligible to use the program. Now more than ever, we need a dedicated, year-round workforce. This isn't an isolated case affecting a handful of farms and processing plants; this is an industry-wide shortage that needs to be quickly addressed.

The U.S. pork industry is proud of the diversity on our farms and across the supply chain. For many foreign-born employees, a position in the U.S. pork industry has often created opportunity to come to our country and become an integral part of a community. Following are four stories demonstrating the vital role foreign-born workers play on our farms and in our communities:

[Cristina Carmona, Prestage Farms, Oklahoma](#)

[Juan Marroquin, LB Pork, Minnesota](#)

[Victor Martinez, Schwartz Farms, Minnesota](#)

[Yuri Rafael, Springer Family Foods, Kansas](#)

One of the foreign-born employees featured, Cristina Carmona, is the technical trainer manager at Prestage Farms in Oklahoma. Cristina, who was born in Mexico and grew up raising cattle, came to the United States in 2003 to obtain her master's degree in agribusiness. She is now the lead international recruiter at Prestage Farms, hiring foreign-born employees to help with hog production. She's a stellar employee who is well respected amongst her colleagues and in 2020, won the Excellence Award from the Oklahoma Pork Council.

As the lead international recruiter, Cristina is also all too familiar with the labor shortage throughout the U.S. pork industry, noting that "in the farms, it's day in, day out. It's not just seasonal. We need to have people on the farms taking care of the pigs....Sometimes it's difficult for us to extend the stay of those [international] employees that we have. They want to excel...and they want to contribute in their communities."

Working in the U.S. pork industry has created the opportunity for Cristina and so many others to come to the United States and become integrated in their communities. We are proud of our diversity throughout the pork supply chain and need labor visa reform to enable the continued production of our year-round industry.

If the labor shortage is not addressed, it could lead to farms and packing plants shutting down, causing serious financial harm to the communities in which they operate. As a result, pork production would be constrained, leading to higher food prices for consumers and the United States becoming an unreliable trading partner for the many countries around the world that rely on our pork.

### **The Solution**

As outlined earlier in my testimony, hog farmers and processing plants pay wages significantly above average local wage rates, but the dwindling rural population near our facilities mean U.S. pork producers are increasingly reliant on a foreign-born workforce. Many in our industry rely on the seasonal H-2A visa program, but pork production is year-round, and we need a visa program that reflects that reality.

Earlier this year, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the "Farm Workforce Modernization Act of 2021," which seeks to address agriculture labor reform by offering a capped number of year-round visas. While NPPC believes the bill is a step in the right direction, a cap will force different sectors of livestock agriculture to compete against one another for the same limited number of year-round visas. In that scenario, no one wins and, ultimately, the consumer will be punished with reduced pork supplies and higher prices at the store.

It is also important to note that current H-2A visas do not have a cap because limiting factors are already built into the program. When an employer asks for H-2A workers, they are required to demonstrate to their State Workforce Agency they have attempted to fill the roles with domestic workers, leaving visa labor as the only viable option. There is no need for an additional cap on H-2A visas issued solely because they are non-seasonal.

NPPC urges Congress to address this pressing matter by opening the H-2A visa program to year-round labor without a cap. We look forward to working with members of this committee and other lawmakers to achieve this outcome.

### **Conclusion**

U.S. pork production is a full-time, year-round job. Our industry is vital to the U.S. economy and prosperity in rural communities. Our foreign-born workforce is an essential part of our supply chain, and we need visa reform to reflect our year-round needs.

We thank you for holding this hearing today on such an important issue and we stand ready to work with you to ensure hog farmers can continue to lead the way as a vibrant American farm sector.