

**Statement by
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Secretary of Agriculture
Before the Senate Committee on the Judiciary**

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Grassley, and members of this Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about farmworkers and their important role in the food and agriculture industry and overall economy.

The full economic contribution of the food and agriculture industries is estimated to be nearly \$7 trillion. The industries account for nearly one-fifth of the country's economic activity, contributing \$2.7 trillion to the U.S. gross domestic product and supporting more than 40 million jobs – nearly 20 million directly and more than 20 million in supplier industries¹. The key to the success of these industries are millions of farmworkers – an estimated 2.5 million, half of whom are estimated to be undocumented – and our immigration system does not work for them and, thus, does not work for our farmers. As Secretary of Agriculture I have met farmers and ranchers across the country who worry that our immigration system is broken and continually feel the consequences. They struggle with the uncertainty of the labor force from harvest to harvest, worrying they will be unable to find farmworkers to keep them in business. This kind of instability jeopardizes our farmers' ability to be competitive, puts in question the security of our food supply, and has repercussions on our overall economy.

When the COVID-19 pandemic first struck, we were given a wake-up call regarding farmworkers. They were deemed essential employees and the pandemic put a spotlight on the importance of this workforce and their contributions to our nation's food security. They worked every day in fruit orchards and dairy farms, and in the blazing heat and the freezing cold, to ensure families had food on their tables. It's not easy work – it's back-breaking work, for low wages. A Department of Labor survey shows that one third of farmworkers report family incomes below the poverty line, despite the nature of work requiring long hours in the fields and on the farms. And these workers faced an especially high risk of contracting COVID-19, with little recourse for keeping their jobs if they fell ill or were exposed. Yet, farmworkers kept showing up, day after day, risking their health and the health of their families, to secure the nation's food supply chain.

These workers are not just essential during a pandemic. They are critical contributors every day to an essential sector of our economy and we should start treating them accordingly – providing

¹ *Feeding the Economy*, <https://feedingtheeconomy.com/> (last visited July 19, 2021)

them the worker protections they deserve and ending the unnecessary fear so many face day after day without legal immigration status.

I applaud grower groups and unions for coming together and acknowledging the importance of addressing these issues by reaching a compromise and supporting the bipartisan Farm Workforce Modernization Act of 2021 which passed out of the U.S. House of Representatives on March 18, 2021, with a vote of 247-174. This legislation provides farmworkers – many of whom have lived in this country for years – an opportunity to earn citizenship. With legal status and a path to citizenship, farmworkers would be able to earn higher wages and exercise their rights under our labor laws to demand better working conditions. It also includes provisions that give needed certainty to employers and includes funding for farmworker housing so that employers do not have to incur additional expenses. These are challenging issues and I applaud the collective effort and agreement of those involved in working to find a path forward.

We need Congressional action to address these challenges, and we need that action now. This past year has demonstrated what many of us already knew: the collective contributions of immigrant farmworkers are key to keeping our food supply abundant, safe and affordable – before, during and after pandemics. I urge my Congressional colleagues here today to meet this moment of bipartisanship efforts and move legislation forward this year that provides legal status and a path to citizenship for farmworkers – securing a reliable workforce for our agriculture industry – as well as legislation that provides a living wage for these essential workers along with strong labor protections. I look forward to supporting your efforts in any way I can and I welcome your questions.