

Labor bill seems to check the right boxes

For years we've advocated for legislation that would give agricultural producers and processors easier access to affordable, legal foreign workers they need to make up for the lack of domestic laborers who want to pick, pack and process food-stuffs.

A bipartisan measure introduced last week in the U.S. House of Representatives seems to fit the bill.

The Farm Workforce Modernization Act, H.R. 4916, has the backing of 24 Democrats and 20 Republicans, including House Agricultural Committee Chairman Collin Peterson, D-Minn.

The bill has tentative support from nearly 250 agricultural groups and labor organizations.

Despite its importance to the country's food supply, many U.S. citizens consider farm work to be menial. It's certainly hard, often back-breaking work. In many cases it's also seasonal, making the jobs less attractive.

As a result, much of the manual farm labor in the orchards, vineyards, vegetable fields, nurseries and dairies in the U.S. is performed by immigrants, mostly who are in the country illegally and who have proffered fraudulent documents to their employers.

These workers are remarkably efficient, but the reliance on what is largely an illegal workforce has been problematic for a number of reasons. And while Congress has provided a program that grants temporary visas for foreign workers, it has been made complex and inadequate due largely to the politics surrounding the immigration question.

The Farm Workforce Modernization Act appears

to address some of those vexing issues.

The bill establishes merit-based, five-year, renewable work visas for people in the country illegally who can show they have worked in agriculture at least 180 days over the last two years. They must work in agriculture 100 days a year to be eligible for indefinite renewals and will be able to cross the border whenever they want.

The bill allows those workers a path to permanent legal status.

The bill also dedicates an additional 40,000 green cards per year for agricultural workers and allows H-2A workers to apply directly for green cards after working in the U.S. 10 years.

Temporary three-year visas would be allowed for year-round dairy and non-dairy jobs.

It phases in mandatory use of the E-Verify system, a big step in ensuring a legal workforce.

The bill prevents increases in the Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR) minimum wage for H-2A workers through 2020. It prevents the AEWR from increasing more than 3.25% or decrease by more than 1.5% in 2021 through 2029. Still too much for some, but a start.

It makes the H-2A visa process less complicated and more employer friendly. Farm interests say these provisions don't go far enough, but we think it's a good start on which more can be built if the bill progresses to the Republican Senate.

The big question now is whether a sensible piece of bipartisan legislation has a chance of passing with an election but a year away, particularly with Washington's highly charged political climate.

We hope so.



GUEST COMMENT

Support local businesses before they disappear

By Jade McDowell

When a local business announces they are closing their doors for good, the announcement is often greeted with a flood of comments from people sad that it is closing.

I'm sure the heartbroken business owners wonder where all those people were when they were struggling to attract enough customers to stay open.

I know I've been guilty of it — when Crazy Mike's Video closed a couple of years ago I complained along with everyone else that Hermiston would no longer have a video store. But when I was honest with myself, I knew I only used them for rentals once or twice per year. It wasn't fair for me to expect the business to stay open for my convenience when I was only contributing a handful of dollars per year to the cause.

Running a business is expensive. People who have never done it don't understand the behind-the-scenes costs run far above the actual product they have in their hand. When you pay for food at a restaurant, you're not just paying

for the food, you're paying for the rental costs of the building, utility bills, servers, cooks, dish washers, managers, bookkeeping, advertising, equipment to handle credit card transactions and more.

As a newspaper editor, I can sympathize with that. At least people expect to pay something for the food at the restaurant — many people are outraged at the mere suggestion they should pay for our product at all.

Having never gained first-hand experience running a business themselves, they believe that because they access the news on a screen instead of on a physical piece of paper in their hands, there is no cost to produce it. The articles just magically appear, without anyone being paid to research, interview, write, edit, photograph, sell advertisements, post it to the web and print it. Not to mention overhead costs such as publishing software and camera equipment.

Others understand the general idea of running a business but don't know anything about the economics of the newspaper industry, making suggestions such as "just sell more ads" as if

the idea had never occurred to us before.

And so we join that great struggle that every local business owner knows: Crunching the numbers over and over again to see where we might be able to scrape up more revenue, rejoicing in the "good months" that allow us to continue serving the community and tightening our belts through the bad.

Communities get what they pay for in terms of shopping options. If you have a favorite restaurant, shop or service provider who you would miss terribly if they were gone, do them a favor and put your money where your mouth is. Good recommendations can be valuable, but at the end of the day words don't pay the bills. Money does. Your money.

Shop local and eat local this holiday season. The three extra dollars that you spend by doing so instead of buying online or in the big city just might help save someone's business.

Jade McDowell is the News Editor of the Hermiston Herald, a sister paper of the Blue Mountain Eagle.

GUEST COMMENT

We must continue standing up for our veterans

The men and women who have selflessly served our great nation deserve the utmost support and respect. While every Veterans Day we pay special respect and honor to our nation's finest by visiting gravesites, attending memorial services, and participating in parades, let us also remember that veterans deserve the best every day. That is why one of my top priorities in Congress is ensuring our veterans receive the service and support they earned every day.

This year, we have done a lot for our veterans. First, Congress passed the biggest budget in history for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), particularly when it comes to health care. That includes \$8.6 billion for mental health care services, \$400 million for opioid abuse prevention, \$206 million for suicide prevention outreach, and \$270 million specifically for rural veterans' health initiatives. A strong VA budget is especially important with the launch of the VA MISSION Act.

The VA MISSION Act, which I cosponsored, was signed into law by President Trump last year. This past June, the community care program, an aspect of the law, launched. This gives veterans increased access to timely, quality care by allowing them to seek care in the community and by establishing a more permanent network of doctors to partner with VA and see



U.S. Rep. Greg Walden

veterans close to where they live. The community care program is essential for veterans living in rural areas, like much of our district, because the nearest VA may be hours away.

Another huge win our veterans received this year came when the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2019 was signed into law. This law ensures that Vietnam Navy veterans who served in the offshore waters of Vietnam receive the presumption of exposure to Agent Orange, a toxic chemical used during the Vietnam era. Many veterans exposed to the chemical found that it resulted in medical issues such as colon cancer.

In addition to providing necessary compensation to our veterans, the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act included a provision I coauthored that ensures veterans in rural Oregon no longer face needless delays when seeking to buy a home using the benefits they earned through their service. I have heard several horror stories from veterans about delays getting an appraisal for their VA-backed loan. Some waited up to nine weeks to even have an appraiser assigned to their case, making them far less competitive as prospective buyers in the housing market — one veteran

even lost his prospective home when his interest rate lock expired as he waited for an appraisal. That's unacceptable. Now, veterans living in rural America will get a fair chance to have their appraisals completed in a timely manner.

In June, we celebrated the 75th anniversary of the GI Bill, which has allowed our nation's veterans and their families to return home to pursue further education. I worked to help improve this benefit by supporting the passage of the Forever GI Bill, which made the benefits last a lifetime.

While we have already achieved a significant amount for our veterans this year, we still have much more ahead of us. I will continue to work to improve the benefits and services that veterans receive and help veterans in my district with any issues they may face with VA. If you are a veteran in the 2nd District of Oregon, and you're having problems with VA, please give my office a call at 800-533-3303. My team and I are ready to assist you with problems you are having with VA. We will do everything in our power to get results for you.

God bless all our veterans and their families, and thank you for your service.

Greg Walden is the U.S. representative for Oregon's 2nd Congressional District, which includes Umatilla and Morrow counties.

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