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Farmers have immigration concerns

By **RACHEL E. LEONARD**, Staff Writer

CHESNEE - Immigration reform that fails to address inequities in the nation's guest worker program could disrupt food production across the country, a group of local farmers told U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis on Friday.

Under the current system, employers who hire foreign labor for temporary agricultural employment - the "H-2A" visa program - are mandated to provide set wages and provide transportation and housing for their employees. Wages for temporary non-agricultural work, or "H-2B," are exempt from the same wage standards and housing and transportation requirements.

Many Spartanburg County farmers want H-2A to shed its additional requirements, which they say penalize them for using legal foreign labor, compared to those who hire illegal immigrants at minimum wage or less. But if a national immigration policy cuts off the foreign labor supply without providing for a renewed guest worker program, farmers say the results could be disastrous.

"We won't survive it," said Henry Gramling, president of Gramling Farms. "We won't survive it without a labor force. It's like you cutting off someone's head - you aren't going to get it back."

Jamie Spears, farm manager at Inman Sod, shared the same concerns.

"In the meantime, who's going to feed America?" he asked. "These things have to work together, go in together."

Inglis, who met for lunch with farmers at Strawberry Hill USA near Chesnee, supports the guest worker program but agrees H-2A and H-2B need to be "harmonized." And there's little chance of that occurring outside a national immigration overhaul, the Greenville Republican said.

Inglis' four-point plan for reform entails securing borders, developing a tamper-proof ID card for foreign workers, revamping the guest worker program and erecting a "path to citizenship" for certain foreign nationals. He wants all points addressed at the same time but acknowledged that might not occur.

"It's a risk that it would happen that way, that we would do border control and Social Security verification and not get to a guest worker program that works for the United States," Inglis said. "And there is a risk of that, and I hope we can avoid that outcome."

The H-2A program here mandates wages of \$8.51 per hour for legal migrant workers, for at least 30 hours a week. Despite wages less than that in some service industries, farmers say they receive little or no response from native-born Americans wanting to pick peaches and pluck chickens.

'Path to citizenship'

Inglis, who wants to increase the number of legal immigrants and decrease the number of illegal immigrants in the country through programs for work and citizenship, knows those ideas don't ring well with much of his American constituents.

Inglis said much of the feedback he receives on the immigration questions runs along the lines of "shoot to kill and drop the bodies over the fence." But the farmers who gathered at Strawberry Hill Friday described their laborers - some call them their "boys" - as hardworking and family-oriented.

Stressing immigration through and under the rule of law, Inglis said granting citizen status to some immigrants would help the country grow and even make it better. It's appropriate, he said, to encourage some foreign nationals who come here to work to stay and become a part of the country.

"These new immigrants may actually renew American culture by showing us how to work again," Inglis said.

While U.S. citizens work hard, Inglis said, the dedication and willingness of many immigrants to work agriculture jobs many others don't want is "inspiring."

After Friday's lunch, Inglis toured one of about 10 buildings that house the 111 guest workers employed by Strawberry Hill owner James Cooley. Most of Cooley's workers sleep in 300 square-foot bedrooms housing six workers each, with communal bathrooms and kitchens. The floors are cement; the rooms are filled with clothes, ball caps, radios, blankets and a few Spanish-language newspapers.

Cooley, who made sure to send Inglis away with a basket of strawberries, agreed he and his fellow farmers need assistance in maintaining the flow of legal foreign workers to the nation's farms.

"I just know we need some help, and something that's going to be viable for everybody," he said.

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