

# The Agricultural Guestworker Act Gaining Ground

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In October, the Agricultural Guestworker Act of 2017 (House Resolution 4092), introduced by U.S. Rep. John Goodlatte (R-Va.), was passed by the House Judiciary Committee and sent to the full House. Michigan's lone representative on the committee, Rep. John Conyers (D), voted against it.

John Kran, national lobbyist with Michigan Farm Bureau, commented that "any farmer who's dealt with this issue will tell you that the availability of domestic workers continues to decrease. This bill not only deals with the seasonal workforce, but the need for year-round ag workers." The need for such legislation is clear, at least to farmers. Currently, the only way farmers can have the peace of mind about a legal workforce is to go through the H-2A program, which is so notorious for burdensome paperwork, long lead times and woefully complicated processes that Michigan Farm Bureau established the Great Lakes Agricultural Labor Services (GLALS) to help farmers successfully navigate the process.

Goodlatte's legislation would create a new H program, called H-2C, under which a new guest-worker program would be established, allowing farmers to hire workers for up to 18 months for seasonal labor and 36 months for year-round labor, such as are needed on dairy farms, other livestock operations, and food processing, including meat packing. "Michigan dairies have a huge need for the longer visa, and poultry and hog operations have trouble finding people too," Kran said. "The bill isn't perfect, but it's a good place to start." Among the things Farm Bureau would like to see changed in the bill is a mandatory limit on the number of workers allowed in. The bill proposes that the number be capped at 450,000 per year, with an 'escalator' for additional need.

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