

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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Horticulture Flexes Grassroots Muscle on Workforce Solutions

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AmericanHort and its state association grassroots partners have shown some grassroots muscle on three federal legislative initiatives important to a legal and stable horticulture workforce.

On March 17, AmericanHort and roughly two dozen state association partners joined a total of almost 140 organizations on a letter to House of Representatives leadership. The letter responded to the looming threat of the Legal Workforce Act (H.R.1147) being voted on in the House without provisions that would ensure legal workforce options for agricultural and seasonal employers. H.R.1147 would mandate that all U.S. employers use the federal E-Verify program.

“Mandatory E-Verify would have a devastating impact on our industry in the absence of a legislative solution for agriculture’s labor needs,” the letter stated. “Immigration enforcement without a program flexible enough to address the labor needs of fruit, vegetable, dairy, nursery, and other farms and ranches will result in many U.S. farmers, their farm employees and many in their rural communities losing their livelihoods, as well as an overall decrease in U.S. agricultural production.”

Next, the members collectively generated hundreds of letters, phone calls and tweets calling for resumption of H-2B program processing. The seasonal worker visa program was abruptly shut down by the Departments of Labor and Homeland Security at a key time for the landscape industry, the single largest user. Horticulture industry grassroots helped persuade an impressive bipartisan group of lawmakers to join on a letter to Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson, insisting that processing resume. It has, for now, though vigilance is the watchword in the coming weeks.

Finally, AmericanHort members and grassroots partners advocated for House members to sign a letter to House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH) and Judiciary chairman Bob Goodlatte (R-VA). The letter emphasizes, “It is imperative that any effort to implement mandatory E-verify be coupled with a solution to agriculture’s unique labor needs. Failure to couple these reforms together would create an unworkable situation for American agriculture.” The final letter was signed by 61 members, mostly Republicans.

“This is an impressive push-back against those who insist that E-Verify must move first,” according to Craig

Regelbrugge, senior vice president for industry advocacy and research with AmericanHort. “In agriculture speak, a promise that positive reforms will come later, after enforcement, is being asked to buy a pig in a poke. We and our grassroots partners helped move the needle on all these important efforts and we’ll continue to work with Congress to get good reforms enacted.” **GT**