

GROWERTALKS

JZ on D.C.

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AmericanHort Joins New Immigration Coalition, Kicks Off Its 2022 Legislative Agenda

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In early March, a diverse group of 30 organizations from a variety of industries and interests announced a new coalition: the Alliance for New Immigration Consensus (ANIC). AmericanHort will be a part of this coalition that consists of faith and education leaders, the business community and immigration advocates to build support for bipartisan legislative solutions that provide permanent legal protections and other reforms for Dreamers and ag workers, in addition to secure and humane processes at the southern border.

ANIC sent a letter to majority and minority leaders of both the House and Senate requesting action on immigration reforms, outlining three priorities heading into the midterm election cycle:

- Address the uncertainty that dominates the everyday lives of so many undocumented immigrants seeking to contribute to our economy
- Tackle issues facing our border and strengthen our nation's ability to manage the border in a secure, orderly and humane manner
- Solve the workforce limitations in our agricultural sector that are currently contributing to supply chain issues and raising cost concerns

"It's not the first time that a diverse group of interests has gotten together to talk about immigration, but the diversity of interests and organizations is notable," explained American-Hort's Craig Regelbrugge, who said the group has been meeting and strategizing for over a year. "Each organization brings its own perspectives and its own strengths into the mix. It's all these different groups that normally don't collaborate with each other on specific issues coming together saying, 'This is too important for the nation.'"

In the fall of 2021, polling by The LIBRE Initiative (which is one of the members of ANIC) showed that 93% of voters think that immigration reforms are necessary and urgent. ANIC's belief and goals are to coordinate legislative reforms on an incremental basis in the short term that could lead to larger, more systemic reforms in the future rather than put a primary focus on a large comprehensive bill that has little chance of passing in the current political climate.

“These groups have coalesced around the belief that the environment we are in will not bear support of comprehensive immigration reform like we saw in efforts in 2006, 2007 and 2013,” said Craig. “But the environment that we’re in could support limited, but very important and very necessary—and, frankly, pretty urgent—targeted reform.”

Craig did caution that, although this new coalition is a positive, much-needed step in the right direction, it will take time to move the needle. It’s a very difficult political lift under any circumstance, he explained, so nobody’s going in thinking it will be easy. But the hope is that ANIC’s diverse coalition offers some extra political capital and tools for AmericanHort to help enact some real change.

“We are under intense pressure from the industry to look at every opportunity, to roll every rock over, to be creative,” said Craig. “We are routinely asked are we working with other organizations that share common interests because we only have so much bandwidth and so much resource. It’s all of these things that are motivating us. And I would expect that we will see, depending on how the environment unfolds, grassroots opportunities, where people can do the traditional ‘contact your congressman,’ but also grassroots opportunities where people who have cultivated political relationships be able to leverage them. If we get a game on here, it’s going to be an all-industry effort in collaboration with others to push for it.”

For more information, visit anic.co or follow #ANIC on social media.

2022 Congressional Kick-Off

In late February, AmericanHort’s advocacy team held its second annual “Congressional Kick-Off” to discuss the legislative issues affecting our industry that they’ll be focusing on in the coming year. It included a current rundown of the issues and a couple of guest speakers.

- The Build Back Better (BBB) bill may not have passed, but there are parts of it that are very popular, like universal pre-K and Medicare drug price negotiations, and some of them may come down the pipeline in separate legislation or in a scaled-down version of BBB. But the immigration provisions that were originally included in BBB have a much smaller chance of being a part of that.
- As of press time, it was still up in the air how much re-districting was going to affect both parties. One thing Craig said is concerning is the decrease in the number of competitive “purple” districts. Moderate politicians who are more apt to look for bipartisan compromise usually come from these districts—and they’re usually the ones who support our industry’s legislative initiatives.
- Under the same old, same old file is that the ag workforce coalitions continue to push for H-2A and H-2B reform. What IS new is the staggering increase in the number of applications for both visa programs. There’s been a 21% increase in requests for certification for H-2B and a 25% increase for H-2A JUST IN Q1 2022 (there’s been a 20% increase year over year on average).
- The Farm Workforce Modernization Act (FWMA) that’s been sitting in the Senate for a year does have a bipartisan group of Senators that started discussions on the bill before it was put on hiatus during the BBB vote. The hope is that this group will reconvene soon.

Congressman Dan Newhouse (R-WA-4) couldn’t be at the virtual event live because of a scheduling conflict, but he did record a short video talking about his support for the FWMA and the Dignity Act (read more about it below). Craig said that Rep. Newhouse is probably the biggest Republican supporter of ag labor reform we have.

Other speakers included:

- John-Mark Kolb, Legislative Director for Rep. Maria Salazar (R-FL), who spoke at length about the Dignity Act,

which proposes a merit-based system to help businesses secure ag workers while also maintaining border security. John-Mark said it's a good complement to the FWMA that both parties can get behind.

- Sean Babington, Senior Advisor for Climate for the Secretary of Agriculture, spoke about the Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities, a new program that provides up to \$1 billion for pilot projects that create market opportunities for commodities produced using climate-smart practices.

- Jeremy Witte, a staffer with the Senate Ag Committee, discussed the next Farm Bill, which is now in the first stages of the planning phase.

Craig, Tal Coley (now the new CEO of FNGLA) and Evan Lee ended the event with advice on how to engage with your representative and AmericanHort's government policy goals moving forward. Craig said one positive is that that our industry has a broad political coalition, and with a focus on agricultural workers, we can provide targeted solutions for immigration reform, including for Dreamers and stronger border security.

—JZ

Nursery Owner Addresses Worker Misinformation

Dewar Nurseries CEO Bill Dewar felt compelled to speak out against false allegations that his operation hired undocumented workers.

In late January, Florida State Rep. Anthony Sabatini tweeted that migrant workers recorded on video being bussed to a hotel in the town of Maitland were "illegals," saying that it had to stop and to "deport them immediately."

Bryan Nelson, mayor of Apopka where Dewar Nurseries is located, confirmed that the workers are legal and that they were hired to work at Dewar. But Mr. Sabatini's tweet had been retweeted more than 1,600 times and liked by more than 2,800 people. Some commented that they planned to protest after seeing the video and a crowd of people showed up at the Maitland hotel on January 31 to protest the workers.

Bill Dewar spoke to local News 6 about the false claims, saying, "I just hope that the misinformation goes away, and people go off of their convictions and change what's right and wrong—I think that's the biggest thing."

Bill said that all 82 of the workers were hired from Mexico through the H-2A visa program, which Dewar has been using to get workers for the past six years.

"That program goes through the Department of Labor," Bill said. "It's really an attack on humanity is what it is, right? I mean, I'm different than you and so you don't like me and so you know that's the sad part."

"Our responsibilities start at the border, so we have to bring them here and then we have to take them back when the program is finished. That program is essential for us to ramp up our labor force in the holidays. That's when we do a high percentage of our dollars for the year."

Rep. Sabatini refused to delete the tweet even after it was proven to be misleading and said he would "clarify" it if he saw the actual visa that authorized the workers to be in Florida. Even after News 6 produced the visa from Dewar Nurseries and the Department of Labor (H-2A visas are public record) and sent it to the representative's office, it is unclear whether Mr. Sabatini deleted the tweet.

Yesica Ramírez, a spokeswoman for the Florida Farmworkers Association, said that it was unfair for the workers to be portrayed as illegals.

For Bill Dewar's part, he says he hopes this incident will better inform those who saw Rep. Sabatini's tweet and get past the hateful rhetoric.



A Quick Chat With Rep. Underwood

In February, representatives from Ball Horticultural Company held a teleconference with Congresswoman Lauren Underwood (D-IL-14) who represents Ball in her district in Washington, to introduce themselves and discuss the issues that are directly affecting the company and our industry as a whole—the significant labor shortage and immigration reform,

including the H-2A and H-2B visa programs; increased regulations and working relationship with USDA; and tariffs on seed.

The plan is to host the congresswoman for a visit to see the Ball Gardens and take a tour of the Ball Helix labs sometime in late spring/early summer.

—JZ

Pictured: Ball representatives teleconferencing with Congresswoman Lauren Underwood (lower left on the screen).

Steep Visa Fee Increase Proposed

On February 25, AmericanHort submitted official comments opposing a State Department-proposed visa fee increase that would raise per-worker visa fees under the H-2A and H-2B programs from \$190 to \$310, a 63% increase. We pointed out that most workers do not require in-person interviews, and State should focus on further process innovations and efficiencies rather than further burdening employers with higher fees.

—Evan Lee, Policy & Government Relations Director, AmericanHort

News, views, commentary and event coverage about the policies and legislation that directly affect our industry.

Share your thoughts, opinions and news with me: jzurko@ballpublishing.com.