

## **AgJOBS could grant legal residence to migrants**

### **Critics say bill could aid terrorists**

*By J. NOEL ESPINOZA  
The Brownsville Herald*

July 19, 2004 — Thousands of agricultural workers who live in the Rio Grande Valley and work seasonal jobs up north might benefit from a new bill pending in the U.S. Senate.

As the legislation makes headway in Congress, immigration advocates and opponents are urging their legislators to rally for their cause.

In the Valley, immigrant rights advocates said the Agricultural Job Opportunity, Benefits and Security Act of 2003 would benefit thousands of agricultural workers who live in the area and work part of the year in northern states picking crops.

Sens. Larry Craig, R-Idaho, and Edward Kennedy, D-Massachusetts, are sponsoring the legislation, known as AgJOBS.

The bill is expected to reach the Senate floor later this year or early 2005.

“It’s still in committees, but it’s going to be an issue in the presidential race,” said Abner Burnett, Director of South Texas Civil Rights Project, an organization that provides legal assistance on questions of civil rights.

According to the North Carolina Justice and Community Development Center, AgJOBS allows farmworkers to legalize their status when they have worked in agriculture for 575 hours, or 100 days, during any 12 consecutive months between March 1, 2002, and August 31, 2003.

“The legislation is intended to assist about half-a-million to 1.5 million agricultural workers in the United States,” said Vaughn Cox, a spokesman for La Union del Pueblo Entero, an immigrant rights group affiliated with United Farms Workers in San Juan. “The Valley is home to about 100,000 farmworkers who immigrate north. It will benefit many people here.”

Cox said AgJOBS would allow farmworkers to qualify for temporary residence, allowing them to work for any employer they choose and to travel freely.

“It’s a good bill,” said Rogelio Nuñez, director of Proyecto Libertad, immigrant rights group in Harlingen, who added the bill has been crafted by agricultural growers and farm organizations in California. “It will bring better living conditions to undocumented immigrants.”

In contrast to what opponents say, Nuñez said AgJOBS is not an amnesty bill because there are a number of requirements to apply.

“It will cover only those who meet the criteria set out on the bill,” said Nuñez. “It’s not easy for everyone to qualify.”

But opponents fear AgJOBS could grant legalization to potentially millions of undocumented immigrants including terrorists, who pose a threat on national security.

“The AgJOBS amnesty is an open invitation to terrorists who want to gain access to our country,” said Peter Gadiel, a spokesman for 9/11 Families for a Secure America, claiming to represent hundreds of people who lost loved ones in the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

Gadiel, who also is a member of the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a Washington-based group that opposes granting legalization to undocumented immigrants, said two of the terrorists who participated in the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center obtained legal status under a 1986 amnesty for undocumented immigrants.

“A person who crosses the border is a person whose true identity has not been verified by a competent government official,” Gadiel said. “Therefore, any illegal alien can be a terrorist or drug smuggler. We strongly believe that we don’t have any security in this country until our borders are safe from illegal immigration.”

Gadiel claims 70 percent of the 1.3 million people who benefited from the 1986 agricultural amnesty program did so fraudulently.

“In 1986 we were unaware of the terrible threat that a fraud-ridden amnesty program posed to our nation,” Gadiel said. “But after the deaths of 3,000 people and new threats to perpetrate an act of terror before the elections granting amnesty to millions of illegal aliens is reckless and utterly irresponsible.”

Dagoberto Barrera, a Republican and community watchdog that opposes legalization to undocumented immigrants said both parties are sponsoring their own versions to grant legal status to

undocumented immigrants for political purposes.

“I simply oppose it because you are rewarding illegal acts and criminality,” Barrera said. “It’s premeditated. They know it’s illegal, but they still do it.”

Barrera also claims granting legal status to undocumented immigrants would burden the social welfare system.

“They bring their abuelitos (grandparents) to fill our nursing homes,” Barrera said. “What America needs are innovators, inventors, producers and creators.”

Although STCRP does not favor or opposes the bill, Burnett believes the legislation would help deter civil rights violations against undocumented immigrants.

“For women, it’s hard to find help and protection from spousal abuse,” Burnett said. “Undocumented workers are hired by an employer who often refuses to pay them after working for them for a period of time. They use the threat of deportation in order to discourage them from demanding or suing for the wages they owe.”

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