

Focus on Guestworkers

Rep. Smith Proposes H-2C Legislation

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*H.R. 2377 would expand
the guestworker program*

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On August 1, 1997, Representative Bob Smith (R-OR) and other agribusiness supporters introduced a bill in the U.S. House of Representatives that would create a pilot program to increase the availability of temporary foreign labor for fruit, vegetable, and tobacco growers. The program has been dubbed H-2C.

The U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform recently warned against the expansion of guestworker programs in testimony before the House Committee on Immigration and Claims, citing such problems as an agricultural labor surplus, declining real wages, increasing poverty, and increasing farmworker unemployment.

Compounding these problems, warns the Commission, recent changes in U.S. welfare policy mandating "workfare" will place additional strain on the United States' low-wage labor market.

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What You Need To Know About Guestworkers

- * The Bracero Program, a guestworker program implemented during World War II, reached its peak between 1956 and 1959, when roughly 450,000 Mexican farmworkers were sent to the United States yearly. (Federal News Service, 1997)
- * "Operation Wetback," a program designed to stop undocumented immigration spurred by the Bracero Program, apprehended 1,089,583 unauthorized immigrants in 1954 at the height of the guestworker program. (U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform, 1995)
- * The percentage of farmworkers in the U.S. who are undocumented immigrants increased from 7% just after the 1986 immigration amnesty law to 37% during 1994-95. Guestworker programs have recently been proposed as solutions to unlawful immigration. (Department of Labor, 1996)
- * 19,000 H-2A agricultural guestworkers are certified by the Department of Labor to work in the United States yearly. (U.S. Department of Labor, 1997)
- * Between seven and eight thousand H-2A workers were employed in 1997 in North Carolina agriculture alone. In addition, many H-2B workers were employed in agriculture-related industries such as fisheries, plant nurseries, tobacco warehouses, and Christmas tree farms. (Immigrants Legal Assistance Project, 1997)
- * The average member of the North Carolina Growers Association "uses" eight H-2A workers each year. (North Carolina Growers Association, 1995)
- * For farmworkers working under the H-2A program, some of the advantages are: a legal work contract, workers' compensation benefits, a higher wage, and the ability to work legally.

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