IMMIGRATION MEETING THE NEEDS OF AGRICULTURE

SPEECH FOR

CHRIS OLSEN

President Dwight Eisenhower once said, “Farming looks mighty easy when your plow is a pencil and you’re a thousand miles from the cornfield.” Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for giving me the opportunity to share some thoughts with you. The agricultural process is an essential, immediate, and perishable industry, and today I want to address the urgency of finding solutions to the problems the entire country will face if we do not identify and implement more innovative and time sensitive procedures and processes so urgently needed regarding immigrant employment in the agricultural industry. Life is hard enough. We have farms. We have ranches. We have crops that will rot if not tended and harvested in a timely manner. The need for seasonal manpower is imperative. I believe President Eisenhower’s statement. We can no longer sit by and allow our industry to be governed by bureaucracy. It’s literally killing our livelihood and future crops. I once knew someone who, when frustrated with the delays and red tape of bureaucracy would just simply say, “We’re going to die of improvement.” Ladies and gentlemen, pardon the pun, but we have a growing problem on our hands and we must find adequate and sustainable solutions to the employment issues plaguing our industry. We must find the way to access the resources and talents of foreign guest workers and not be strangled by the red tape of an initiative that sadly does not address the immediacy it requires, and so it does not serve its intent.

There are serious flaws in the H2A Visa system and something must be done to implement procedures that work to support our industry. **We** nurture and nourish the country, for heaven’s sake! We need to find an efficient and prompt response to the question, “How do we find and tap into the labor pool we so urgently need?”

In an article entitled, “Seasonal Farm-worker Visa Program Frustrates Growers,” written for the McClatchy Newspapers, Sean Cockerham highlights several urgent instances. He tells us about farmers like Jim Little from Idaho who needs immigrant workers from Latin America, but the government is making it too hard to follow the rules. He tells us of Mr. Little’s daughter, Rochelle, who, along with her husband, have all but given up their sheep ranch from the frustration and futility of trying to hire workers from Peru. Rochelle tells of how she began the process of completing the required paperwork in July, but the workers she so desperately needed didn’t arrive until February of the next year! Farmers and ranchers are strapped for hands, and to have to spend endless hours trying to unravel streams of bureaucracy is not only frustrating, it’s counterproductive. The paperwork is complicated, minor discrepancies can cause endless delays in the process and the convoluted interface between several government agencies like the Labor Department, the Department of Homeland Security, and the State Department is enough to try the patience of even the most dedicated of administrative geniuses. The simple truth is, farmers have a priority and that is to sow the seeds, reap the harvest and feed the nation.

We must find the way to streamline the process and make sure all are served in a respectful manner. In a post 9-11 world, I can certainly understand the need for thoroughness and caution to prevail throughout the process of finding, vetting and hiring immigrant guest workers, but I also know that in this world of advanced technologies, detailed databases and a growing appreciation of all things immediate, the “farm to table” movement must be reflected in every aspect of our industry. In this day and age of information super highways, the process to secure the small percentage of foreign farm workers so urgently needed to support this industry must be reformed to meet the needs of the farmers. It’s time to “think outside the crate.” It’s time to devise safe solutions to support immigrant worker reform. It’s time for us to find the solutions-whether it’s establishing satellite overseas labor agencies that vet the candidates so they are pre-cleared for security, or making sweeping reforms of the H2A visa process, something has to be done **NOW**. I urge all of us to work together to find the way to support the one industry that truly provides the staff of life to all Americans and their neighbors.

Thank you all!