

At the Top of the Legislative To-Do List

Immigration reform and a Farm Bill are top priorities for the horticulture and nursery industries.

By Craig Regelbrugge and Joe Bischoff

With a pair of strong, bipartisan procedural votes (one passed 82–15 and the second, 84–15) the United States Senate has embarked on the next phase of the journey toward a modernized immigration system. Those votes simply allowed for the debate to begin. They don't foreshadow any particular outcome.

As this issue of *Big Grower* was going to press in late June, progress was being made and by July 4, we are hoping to have clarity on half the immigration equation — passage of a comprehensive bill in the U.S. Senate. If the vote is strong and bipartisan, there will be momentum to continue.

The path through the House of Representatives is bound to be trickier though. Sharp divides within the Republican Party suggest no path to enacting broad-based reform without quite a few “Yes” votes from Democrats. And, some of the piecemeal bills like the “Ag Act” now being considered in the House Judiciary Committee may leave the GOP vulnerable to accusations that the Party is anti-Hispanic and anti-family.

The Bigger Picture

Let's step back and look at the broader picture. The simple fact is that over several decades, America's economic needs have not been well served by her immigration system.

The system is generous by world standards. But most legal immigration is based on family ties and does not necessarily align with the needs of the economy at either the high end (scientists, engineers, etc.) or the low end (agriculture, manual labor jobs). Temporary worker programs are hobbled by bureaucracy and artificially low caps.

The Senate's bill (S.744, the Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act) is by no means perfect. Yet, it contains all the basic elements of a broad repair and modernization: border security, internal enforcement, visa reform and more.

For the green industry, there is a lot to support:

- A new, more market-based visa program for farm, nursery and greenhouse workers;
- Improvements to the H-2B program that so many landscape firms rely upon; and
- Earned legal status programs for both farm and other workers.

The dialogue around immigration reform has been a bit like mob rule. In poll after opinion poll, a broad majority of Americans support the building blocks of a modernized immigration system. They want solutions. Yet, most are not passionate about the issue. They don't call their congressmen; they don't vote on the issue.

By contrast, a small but vocal minority is energized to oppose any type of solution other than mass deportation. That's about as unrealistic as pigs flying, but the noise has stifled solutions and left us with the status quo. Which, as Sen.

Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) points out, is more than a little like amnesty.

Regardless of where the legislation is in the process when you read this, grassroots movement will be important. Go to www.capwiz.com/anla/home to send an email message to your elected representatives. Get friends, family, coworkers, vendors and customers to do the same.

Otherwise, we will look back at the lost moment of opportunity and say, “What happened?” And our elected representatives will reply, “The calls were 25 to 1 against.” That's mob rule. It is not leadership, nor a business plan.

Passing the Farm Bill

On to the Farm Bill. After a failed attempt to pass a new five-year Farm Bill last year, Congress appears poised to pass the bill before the fiscal year ends on September 30.

On June 10, the U.S. Senate passed its version of the 2013 Farm Bill (Agriculture Reform, Food and Jobs Act of 2013) with a strong bipartisan vote of 66-27. As this issue of *Big Grower* was going to press, the U.S. House of Representatives was set to begin debate of their version of the bill (the week of June 17).

The 2008 Farm Bill was the first time that programs focused on supporting specialty crops, which includes floriculture and nursery crops, were included in the bill.

Unlike the traditional crop subsidies and direct payments for commodity crops, the specialty crop provisions support things like crop research, pest and disease management strategies and crop marketing efforts.

These provisions include Specialty Crop Block Grants (SCBG), Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI) and the newly created Coordinated Plant Management Program, a merging of two previously independent programs — Section 10201 and the National Clean Plant Network.

It was Section 10201 that provided nearly \$400,000 in funding to research and answer pivotal questions to help growers and landscapers manage impatiens downy mildew.

Recognizing the importance and significant return on investment realized from the 2008 bill, the Senate bill and the version passed by the House Agriculture Committee show sustained and even expanded support for the specialty crop programs. “ANLA and our partners in the Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance have followed up on our 2008 successes of establishing these highly effective programs for our industry with an expansion in support of an economic environment where cuts or program eliminations are the norm,” said Michael Geary, executive vice president of the ANLA and OFA. ■

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AD INDEX

Advertiser	Page
Big Grower Exec Summit	20-21
BioWorks	9
Fine Americas	14-15
GPN Website	back cover
Hurst Boiler	5
MasterTag	7
Nufarm	17
Premier Tech Hort	13
Syngenta	2, 11
Rough Bros.	19
T.O. Plastics	23