

New York Farm Bureau President David Fisher's Comments During Sec. Vilsack's July 16, 2021 Visit to SUNY Cobleskill:

Thank you, Mr. Secretary, for your visit today and to Representative Delgado and SUNY Cobleskill for hosting us.

New York has a proud farming tradition and is one of the most diverse agricultural states in the country in terms of the food and commodities that we grow and produce. Because of that diversity, there are naturally many needs in New York State.

Perhaps the biggest is a strong and reliable workforce. We all know the difficulties in the labor workforce for all businesses, especially coming out of the pandemic. The shortage of agricultural workers limits our farms' ability to plant and harvest crops, and care for our animals, which ultimately impacts far more than our farms, but also our country's overall food supply.

To attract and maintain workers, New York agriculture offers competitive wages above minimum wage, has been a leader in promoting workplace safety and farmworker trainings in multiple languages. We have advocated for dedicated agricultural workforce specialist at our land grant at Cornell that provides human resource and workforce education across the state. New York also has Agri-Business Child Development centers geared towards education, daycare and social service programs for the children of farmworkers and their families. And farmworker safety and access and education of vaccines have been a priority of New York Farm Bureau and our members throughout the pandemic.

In New York agriculture, we have both a seasonal workforce for fruits, vegetables, crops and nurseries as well as a year-round labor force on our livestock and dairy farms. Many of our seasonal guestworkers come to the United States through the H-2A visa program. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, New York ranks eighth in the total number of H-2A positions. Unfortunately, despite the need to attract and employ year-round workers, there is no agricultural guest worker program for these positions. The Farm Workforce Modernization Act would help to change that. It would also provide certainty and status to workers currently in the U.S.

It will include dairy farms in the federal guest worker visa program as well as address the needs of migrant workers who are already in this country. Their contributions to our food system are invaluable and should be recognized through the passage of this bill.

It may be worth considering some additions to the bill, including adjusting the cap on year-round guest worker visas, ensuring a fair and competitive wage rate, and creating an employment threshold that accurately reflects an agricultural workday. Regardless, this legislation would take a significant step to ensure that New York agriculture is positioned to have a sustainable and reliable workforce that will support our local food supply and rural economy.

We are fortunate to have Representative Delgado and a number of his New York colleagues on both sides of the aisle supporting the Farm Workforce Modernization Act. It has passed the House and hopefully, with the attention this forum brings to the issue today, we can see some movement on the Senate. We continue to engage with New York's Senator's on this important issue, and the need to continue to move forward on legislation.