



# NATIONAL ONION ASSOCIATION

United for the Onion Industry from Seed to Shelf

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## **Colorado can't afford to let our farm workforce disappear**

The next time you walk through the produce section of your local grocery store, imagine finding empty shelves where Colorado onions, sweet corn, peaches and lettuce should be. It may sound far-fetched, but without meaningful agricultural workforce reform, that scenario becomes increasingly possible.

Colorado agriculture depends on people willing to do one of the hardest jobs in America. From the onion fields along Highway 85 to vegetable farms on the Western Slope and the San Luis Valley, thousands of workers spend long days planting, weeding, irrigating and harvesting the food that ends up on our tables. These are physically demanding, seasonal jobs that too few domestic workers are willing to fill.

For generations, Americans have become further removed from farming. Most consumers no longer have a personal connection to agriculture, making it easy to overlook the labor required to produce fresh food. Yet every head of lettuce, bag of onions and box of peaches represents months of work by skilled agricultural employees whose contributions often go unnoticed.

Federal law already requires farmers seeking H-2A guest workers to recruit domestic employees first and offer competitive wages. Despite those efforts, growers across the country continue to struggle to find enough American workers willing to perform seasonal field labor. Case in point: this past year, almost 415,000 H-2A guestworker positions were certified. But only 182 of those temporary agricultural jobs were filled by domestic applicants. Without immigrant labor, that threatens farms of every size, including many here in Colorado.

This is why we encourage our Congressional delegation to support the Saving Agriculture's Workforce Act of 2026. The SAWA would modernize agricultural labor policy by streamlining the hiring process for seasonal workers while creating a practical way for experienced agricultural employees already contributing to our farms to continue working legally. Just as important, it preserves the temporary nature of the agricultural workforce. The bill does not create a pathway to citizenship, and workers would continue to undergo federal screening and remain subject to existing security requirements.

Agriculture is also an economic engine for Colorado. Colorado's immigrant workforce contributes \$2 billion in state tax revenue annually; and they contribute \$4.6 billion in federal tax revenue, according to the Colorado Fiscal Institute (CFI). This includes \$2.6 billion in Social Security and \$697.2 million in Medicare contributions. Furthermore, undocumented immigrants contributed \$436.5 million in Colorado state and local taxes in 2022, the CFI reports.

The stakes extend beyond economics. Food security is national security. A nation that cannot reliably produce its own food becomes increasingly dependent on imports and more vulnerable to supply chain disruptions, foreign pests and food safety challenges. While imported produce will always play a role in our food system, Americans benefit from maintaining a strong domestic agricultural sector capable of producing safe, affordable food close to home.

Colorado has long been an agricultural leader. Our farmers and ranchers ask for little beyond the opportunity to compete and the workforce needed to harvest the crops they grow. They are not seeking amnesty or lower standards. They are asking for a practical, lawful system that reflects today's agricultural realities.

We commend Colorado's Rep. Gabe Evans for co-sponsoring the Saving Agriculture's Workforce Act and encourage the rest of Colorado's congressional delegation to give the legislation serious consideration. Agricultural labor reform should not be viewed as a partisan issue. It is an issue of food security, economic stability and preserving Colorado's farming heritage.

If we want future generations to enjoy locally grown Colorado produce instead of wondering why grocery shelves are empty, Congress must act before today's labor shortage becomes tomorrow's food shortage.

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