



MEMO TO THE TRANSITION TEAM OF PRESIDENT-ELECT BARACK OBAMA FROM THE ASSOCIATION OF FARMWORKER OPPORTUNITY PROGRAMS—PART II

The Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs (AFOP) is the national federation of nonprofit and public agencies that operate job-training programs for America's migrant and seasonal farmworkers.

Farmwork is extremely dangerous, backbreaking labor characterized by incredibly low wages, few or no benefits, and no job security. The average farmworker is able to work only about sixty percent of the year, as crops ripen at different times in different places. The 2.5 million workers seldom take advantage of public benefits available to them, and despite the strong efforts of farm labor unions, only a tiny percentage have the benefits and protections of organized labor. **The programs that AFOP members operate offer workers access to new careers that allow their families to survive and prosper.**

The agricultural sector of America is a small but vital part of our economy. Generating over \$96 billion per year and employing 2.5 million workers, it is responsible for the safe and secure food supply that we enjoy. While our nation usually benefits from the exportation of some of our crops, in the past few years there have been some months during which a majority of our food was imported. We believe it is critical that America keep strong control of its food supply; to do that will require investing in the agricultural sector's workforce. AFOP members currently operate programs that train farmworkers into careers outside of agriculture. Yet, studies show that a majority of farmworkers would, if it were economically feasible, remain in agriculture.

In late 2007 AFOP successfully urged Congress to include a "footprint" for farmworkers in the Farm Bill. Accordingly, a list of services was authorized in the final bill that was enacted. We believe the Obama Administration should urge funding for this program: it will help farmers achieve a more stable and better trained workforce, while creating career ladders and upward mobility for experienced farmworkers. In addition, it can serve as a springboard to helping farmworkers become small farmers. In some states, new, small farms are owned by Hispanics who had previously worked in the fields and somehow amassed enough to purchase a few acres. This kind of development can be assisted through this new Farm Bill program.

Achieving success in the Farm Bill services will require strong collaboration between workers and growers. AFOP members are well situated to help lead that effort. Our members not only provide job training, but also conduct English language classes for workers whose first language is Spanish, and hold pesticide safety, heat stress prevention, and other trainings that help keep farmworkers safely at work. These activities can only be done through close cooperation with employers. The goals of DOL funded programs, along with the severity of eligibility requirements, make it nearly impossible for the Workforce Development Act to satisfy the needs of agricultural workers and their employers.

SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS: The Obama Administration should request a 2010 funding level of \$40 million to implement Section 14202 of the Farm Bill of 2007. That would permit a national grants program to begin and could serve tens of thousands of farmworkers with a variety of services aimed at their economic stabilization. This program would include increasing skills in agricultural equipment and technology, cross-training among various crops, and would provide the emergency services that desperately poor migrant workers need to survive as they move from job to job among several states. The USDA should have a secretary that not only meets the needs of growers but is sensitive to the farm labor force as well, so that new programs will have a supporter within the Administration.



LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS: The heart of the problems that farmworkers face, requiring the safety net of services found in the various migrant and farmworker programs, is the fact that farmwork is so poorly remunerated. Wages are rock bottom, job-related benefits almost nonexistent, and labor standards very low and seldom enforced. Workers in other sectors of the economy have progressed greatly in the last half-century, some because of union organizing, and others because of the economic imperative of supply and demand. Not farm labor. Farm labor unions have done well at increasing wages and securing benefits for those under contract, but that is a very small number and percentage. Most farmworkers toil for the minimum wage and receive absolutely no benefits. They are much less well protected by the Fair Labor Standards Act than other workers. For instance, they receive no guarantee of extra pay for overtime work. This is crucial, for during a harvest they may work from sunup to sundown six or even seven days per week. Their children may legally work in the fields as young as 12 years of age—an age at least two years, and in most cases four years, below that allowed in nearly all other industries.

In the short term, the safety net of services, be it farmworker job training, migrant Head Start, migrant education, migrant health, or farmworker housing, all need to be increased, with strong coordination from the White House (see previous memo on workforce development). Over the longer term the Obama Administration should work to *professionalize* farmwork. Progressive growers would welcome the opportunity to have a way to keep their workers from leaving for other industries, and most workers would be thrilled to be able to earn a living wage in the fields. Funding the Farm Bill services is a small down payment on such professionalization.

Longer term, the immigration reforms of AgJOBS need to be enacted. This would greatly reduce the need for undocumented immigrant labor, thus increasing growers' incentive to increase wages. These changes should be coupled with a robust revitalization of protections by updating labor standards contained in the Fair Labor Standards Act and other legislation affecting farmworkers.

Finally, the Department of Labor should once again become an agency that actively protects and promotes the rights of American wage earners, especially low-wage workers. The lack of enforcement of labor laws is one of the unspoken scandals perpetrated by the Bush Administration over the last eight years, and it affects the ability of farmworkers to achieve a decent and safe workplace.

AFOP stands ready to assist the Obama Administration with these recommendations.

For further information contact:

David A. Strauss, Executive Director
Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs
1726 M Street, N.W.
Suite 800
Washington, D.C. 20036

Telephone: 202-828-6006, ext 101
Email: strauss@afop.org

