



## **Farmworker Priorities in the 2023 Farm Bill**

September 15, 2023

The Honorable Glenn Thompson  
Chair  
Committee on Agriculture  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable David Scott  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Agriculture  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Our country's Farm Bill comes up for debate every five years. Even though this law governs most facets of our country's food and farm system, farmworkers have no place within it. Farmworkers are an essential and vast portion of the agriculture system at an estimated population of approximately 2.5 million according to the 2017 Census of Agriculture, outnumbering farmers, who are just over 2 million, with estimates in North Carolina at 500,000; Florida at 200,000; Texas close to 500,000; California at 800,000; Washington at 150,000; Oregon over 100,000, and the remaining population throughout the United States.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, farmworkers are subject to multiple vulnerabilities, including having to work in disasters, being exposed to pesticides and heat stress, receiving inadequate pay, and accessing substandard housing and healthcare services. Farmworker communities also tend to live with insecurity given that over half are undocumented. Meanwhile, with the average age of farmers increasing and several sectors of the farm and food system increasingly dependent on hired labor, farmworkers are exceptionally well-positioned to become our next generation of farm operators with many farmworker women already involved in beginning farmer projects.<sup>2</sup> Yet, farmworkers face significant barriers to becoming operators, including finances, land, and access to credit, which is often due to immigration status.

We the undersigned are committed to working together with Congress and the Biden-Harris administration to ensure that the 2023 Farm Bill protects farmworkers in our

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<sup>1</sup> United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). "2017 Census of Agriculture." Available here, [https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full\\_Report/Volume\\_1\\_Chapter\\_1\\_US/usv1.pdf](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full_Report/Volume_1_Chapter_1_US/usv1.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Alianza Nacional de Campesinas, along with partner organizations Lideres Campesinas, La Mujer Obrera, and Rural Coalition, have been working since 2021 on what is called 'The Mother Earth Project. (Proyecto Madre Tierra).' In the project, farmworker women cultivate community gardens and home gardens where individuals grow food free of chemicals according to traditional, ancestral practices. A description of the process can be found here, <https://www.alianzanacionaldecampesinas.org/mother-earth-project-1>

nation's food system. We urge your support for the specific bills mentioned below, as well as the inclusion of the additional provisions as you craft the final Farm Bill.

### **1. Expand Authority for Coordination of USDA and Interagency Services for Farmworkers**

In 2008, Congress created the role of Farmworker Coordinator at USDA, which now sits in the Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement (OPPE), under the Office of Advocacy and Outreach.<sup>3</sup> The Coordinator is tasked with administering the low-income migrant and seasonal farmworkers emergency grant program<sup>4</sup>, serving as a liaison to community-based nonprofit organizations; coordinating with other Federal agencies, and state and local governments to meet farmworker needs during emergencies; integrating farmworkers' concerns and voices into USDA's programming; consulting with relevant institutions on agricultural education opportunities that assist low-income and migrant seasonal farmworkers; and supporting farmworkers in becoming producers or landowners.<sup>5</sup>

Although the Farmworker Coordinator is a critical position, the role has not been fully resourced and fails to meet its purpose. Currently, the person filling the role wears multiple hats in OPPE, must balance coordinator responsibilities among other initiatives, and does not have a background rooted in the farmworker community. Even if the role were staffed as envisioned, a single Farmworker Coordinator is insufficient to support and represent the over 2 million farmworkers in the United States. Proposed changes addressing these concerns have been introduced in the *Voice for Farm Workers Act of 2023*, which defines the Farmworker Coordinator's role to include outreach and research specific to farm worker issues and allows the USDA to employ staff to support the Coordinator's initiatives and interagency collaborations.

**Authorize elevation of the Farmworker Coordinator to a fully staffed Farmworker Office** with an expanded mandate to include serving as key link to representatives of farmworkers, including farmworker women, and the organizations that serve them, as well as interagency cooperation. The office should be headed by a dedicated full-time Farmworker Coordinator with sufficient supporting staff, a recommendation also included in the *Voice for Farm Workers Act of 2023* introduced by Senator Padilla. Authority should include establishment and funding of farmworker liaisons with key USDA Agencies and Mission Areas including Farm Service Agency, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Rural Development, National Institute of Food and Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Agricultural Marketing Service, and US Forest Service, and coordination with Department of Labor, Occupational Health and Safety Administration, Environmental Protection Agency, and other relevant federal agencies to support farmworkers. Authority should:

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<sup>3</sup> 7 U.S.C § 6934(f); 7 C.F.R. § 2.700.

<sup>4</sup> 42 USC 5177a Emergency grants to assist low-income migrant and seasonal farmworkers

<sup>5</sup> 7 U.S.C § 6934(f).

- Ensure that the selection of the Coordinator is done in consultation with farmworker organizations and the central duties of this position farmworker centered.
- Establish a Farmworker Advisory Board representative of farmworkers, including farmworker women and H-2A workers, as well as forestry workers, and the organizations that serve them.
- Make the Farmworker Office responsible for staff dedicated to different issues impacting farmworkers. This could be done by assigning staff and farmworker representatives in the areas of labor, nutrition, research, and disaster relief.
- Support pathways for farmworkers to become farmers - including language inclusive resources to farmworkers and beginner farmers including informational webinars and listening sessions on: USDA loan programs; emergency services; how to access careers in agriculture, including specific support for farm working or farmworker community youth; how to report and request support with infrastructure inadequacies; and opportunities for farmworker to share concerns and provide recommendations to the offices' focus areas
- The Coordinator's work should be transparent by requiring the department to make their agenda public, as well as by issuing yearly reports on their findings, progress, and plans for further engagement.<sup>6</sup>
- The USDA should create a separate page on the department's website dedicated to farmworkers, where these resources and materials can be accessed by the public in both English and Spanish, and ensure compliance with the Executive Order 13166, "Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency."<sup>7</sup>

**The Farmworker office needs sufficient funding in order to do research and outreach with Community Based Organizations (CBOs)**, who are language inclusive, serve farmworkers, and are equipped with trusted connections in farmworker communities. Specific outreach and research efforts could include conducting surveys to collect information on rural development concerns, workplace health risks, and community needs such as nutrition and infrastructure. This type of outreach can be done with field visits, which should be done regularly. Ideally, the farmworker office would be expanded to regional sites to support these outreach efforts. Currently, knowledge on the lived realities of farmworkers is limited, with most information coming from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS), which is done only every five years, or the US Census of Agriculture, which features information gathered from farmer-landowners. The Farmworker coordinator must engage in most consistent outreach and research, and should seek

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<sup>6</sup> This recommendation has been proposed in the Supporting our Farm and Food System Workforce Act of 2023, which creates a Farm and Food Workforce Advisory Committee who will produce and make public reports shared with the department. See Supporting our Farm and Food System Workforce Act of 2023 118th Cong. (2023). <https://www.padilla.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/Supporting-Our-Farm-and-Food-System-Workforce-Finalized.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.lep.gov/executive-order-13166>

specific recommendations for modifications and expansions of the collection and use of data from the Farmworker Advisory Board. Such research would help guide USDA program changes.

## **2. Increase Representation of Farmworkers on Key USDA Advisory Committees**

Representatives of farmworker organizations, including farmworker women, H-2A workers, and forestry workers should be made eligible to serve on the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Advisory Committee and the Minority Farm Advisory Committee as well as the National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics Advisory Board.<sup>8</sup> The *Supporting our Farm and Food System Workforce Act of 2023* would significantly improve farm and forestry worker representation in the USDA by creating an Office of Farm and Food System Workforce with a Farm and a Food Worker Advisory Committee. The committee would include members who work directly on farm and forestry worker issues and establishes that two members of the committee will be required to have expertise in issues affecting Farmworker women specifically.

## **3. Provide Statutory Authority and Funding to Extend Relief Grants**

The USDA should provide statutory authority and funding to continue relief grants such as the **Farm and Food Worker Relief Grant Program (FFWR)**, which was created to help farmworkers and meatpacking workers with pandemic-related health and safety costs during this public health emergency. The first of its kind, the FFWR Program awarded \$667 million in 2022 in competitive grant funding to 14 non-profits and one tribal entity to distribute support for meat processing, grocery store, and farm workers for expenses incurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>9</sup> The next farm bill must provide authority for the program and replenish this funding so that the USDA is prepared for the next national emergency. Replenishing this fund will provide dignity and safety for workers, ensure nutrition security, and help to mitigate disruptions to the U.S. food and farm economy in the future.

## **4. Expand USDA's Disaster Relief Authorities to Support Farmworkers during Natural Disasters**

Congress must update the statutory and funding authority for the low-income migrant and seasonal farmworkers emergency grant program.<sup>10</sup> This program has not been funded since the 2008 Farm Bill established the standing Supplemental Revenue Assistance Payments (SURE) program for farmers and ranchers.<sup>11</sup> This program and related insurance programs are “intended to assist producers recovering from production, financial, and physical loss related to or caused by the disaster.” SURE replaced the ad-hoc disaster bills previously used that allowed inclusion of funds for

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<sup>8</sup> See [National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics Advisory Board](#)

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/grants/ffwr>.

<sup>10</sup> See 42 USC 5177a Emergency grants to assist low-income migrant and seasonal farmworkers.

<sup>11</sup> See [https://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA\\_File/29147200808.pdf](https://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/29147200808.pdf).

emergency grants to organizations able to speed emergency assistance to farmworkers. During disasters, farmworkers may lose not only their source of livelihood, but also their access to housing, food, and healthcare in the wake of disaster.<sup>12</sup> Congress must update this emergency grants program to pre-fund a standing emergency fund which can be immediately deployed to support relief efforts by organizations with track records of serving farmworkers, to be replenished promptly as needed. Congress must also update authority to specify that disaster declarations that allow aid for farmers should also automatically declare a disaster for workers of those farmers, who also have needs that must be met in the wake of floods, fires, freezes and other disasters.<sup>13</sup> Producers are extended a helping hand and provided with opportunities to rebuild after a disaster; it is time to expand the SURE program to include support for farmworkers to recuperate from the substantial losses they have suffered as a result of the same catastrophes.

## 5. Nutrition

**Farmworkers need accessible and affordable nutritional foods.** Currently, most farmworkers are not eligible to receive SNAP benefits due to their immigration status. We encourage that workers be eligible for nutritional assistance programs based on income and need, rather than immigration status. Additionally, farmworkers should be provided land access to grow their own food free from pesticides or heavy polluted soils.

## 6. Health

**Farmworkers' exposure and health risks including those related to excessive heat and harmful pesticides must be researched, tracked, and addressed through inter agency collaboration, and policies to mitigate these risks created and/or enforced to assure full protection of workers.**

Extreme weather and disasters are creating increasingly uncertain and life-threatening working and living conditions for farmworkers. As rising summer and winter temperatures and shifting rainfall patterns alter the timing and length of growing seasons, extreme heat is becoming more common and deadly.<sup>14</sup> The recently reintroduced *Asuncion Valdivia Heat, Illness, Injury, and Fatality Prevention Act* would require the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to establish an enforceable national standard to protect workers in high-heat environments by providing paid cooling breaks, access to water, limits to heat exposure time, emergency response, and risk factor trainings for workers. While this bill addresses many heat stress concerns, farmworkers also require attention to the risks caused by wildfires, smoke drift, and floods that leave farmworkers and forestry workers vulnerable to food and housing insecurity. The next farm bill must expand USDA and FEMA authorities to ensure that farmworkers and forestry workers have

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<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.farmbilllaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Farmworkers-Report.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.farmbilllaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Farmworkers-Report.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> See <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/11/13/3599>.

equitable access to disaster preparedness, relief and recovery, including access to protective equipment, emergency assistance during and in the aftermath of natural disasters including floods and fires, and safe housing, and funds to cover lost wages in the wake of extreme weather events.

Farmworkers and their communities are exposed to pesticides, often without adequate personal protective equipment or knowledge of the potential risks and injuries. Such risks include complications related to fertility and pregnancy, neurodevelopmental challenges in children, as well as causes of different forms of cancer, and respiratory illnesses. The USDA and EPA need to co-lead an interagency coordinated effort to review current research, and to conduct additional research and develop evidence on farmworker health risks sufficient to help other agencies develop an appropriate public health response and ensure the enforcement of this response. This research should also be employed to help educate and make the general public aware of the effects of pesticides, heat and injuries on farmworker health. The results of this research must be presented for review and recommendations to the Farmworker Advisory Board. Furthermore, Congress should mandate that all research and regulatory approval and review of pesticides and herbicides must include studies of the exposures actually experienced by farmworkers living in the field, their families living near the field, as well as to farmers. Lastly, Congress should require that more federal research funds are set aside and allocated to developing alternatives to pesticides.

**The USDA also needs to conduct research on the effects of heat stress and air quality on farmworker health.** As historic heat waves drive up temperatures and provoke increasingly frequent, and devastating natural disasters, farmworkers often suffer disproportionately when compared to others. Excessive heat has seriously injured nearly 70,000 U.S. workers and killed 783 people between 1992 to 2016, numbers which have increased since 2016 and could be higher due to underreporting.<sup>15</sup> Recent air quality reports in Oregon and California show a sharp increase in elevated risk due to wildfires. In 2018 alone, Oregon had a large increase in PM2.5 (fine particulate matter) and toxins in the air from wildfires.<sup>16</sup> Further, California's PM2.5 and toxins in the air significantly increased in 2020 from wildfires.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, Texas currently has poor air quality with increased PM2.5 as well due to multiple wildfires throughout the state.<sup>18</sup> Air quality is also affected by pesticide drift and water polluted with pesticide and chemical waste. Regardless of the region in the U.S., farmworkers all over the country are being subjected to dangerous conditions due to poor air quality, excessive heat and cold, or other disasters. Without regular and accurate data and research on these issues, standards and policies will continue to overlook the impact of these conditions on workers. The research findings on heat and air quality impacts should be used to require the Department of Labor to develop enforceable heat advisory standards for both indoor and

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<sup>15</sup> "Extreme Heat and Unprotected Workers," Public Citizen, July 17, 2018, found at [https://www.citizen.org/wp-content/uploads/extreme\\_heat\\_and\\_unprotected\\_workers.pdf](https://www.citizen.org/wp-content/uploads/extreme_heat_and_unprotected_workers.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> See generally, 2017 Air Quality Data at [https://www.i5rosequarter.org/pdfs/environmental\\_peer\\_review/2018%20Oregon%20Air%20Quality%20Annual%20Report.pdf](https://www.i5rosequarter.org/pdfs/environmental_peer_review/2018%20Oregon%20Air%20Quality%20Annual%20Report.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.arb.ca.gov/aqmis2/aqdselect.php>. Pulled data from Aug. and Sept. to compare with Oregon data.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.iqair.com/us/usa/texas>. Data from June 16, 2023.

outdoor farmworkers, and to work with USDA to ensure farmers, ranchers and labor contractors are informed of and held accountable for the enforcement of these standards.

**We further advocate for an interagency collaboration between USDA and HHS to support Community Based Organizations in providing low cost care and mobile clinics for farmworkers.** Limited access to healthcare and services for farmworkers, especially women, exasperates health risks caused by pesticides, heat stress, and poor air quality that can go untreated or noticed. Without the ability to easily obtain affordable health insurance or access low cost care or even mobile clinics, farmworkers are reporting respiratory diseases, skin allergies, diabetes, cancer, miscarriages, and other serious health conditions that could be preventable.

## 7. Housing & Childcare

**The USDA and HUD should develop an interagency coordinated effort to analyze current housing conditions, update, and expand housing assistance programs focusing on rural areas and community based and cooperative housing for farmworkers.** Most housing conditions for farmworkers are inadequate. Workers most often remain subject to whatever their employers provide, which often entails crowded housing, minimal or no cooking facility, and a lack of basic sanitation needs. When in close proximity to farms, workers and their families are in danger of being exposed to pesticides and having their water sources and air contaminated. For these reasons, the USDA ought to dedicate more resources to provide adequate farmworker housing and conduct periodic inspections of facilities. These facilities need to meet basic needs and account for the health needs of workers, such as proper ventilation so that workers do not experience further heat stress in the home. Employers who provide unsafe housing should receive penalties and be required to pass inspections before housing agriculture workers.

**We encourage the USDA to partner with employers, both in terms of addressing the financial needs of worker families, but also to create local, accessible childcare facilities.** Nationally, three quarters of farm families (74%) experienced childcare challenges within the last five years, most often due to cost and availability, followed by quality and distance to childcare services.<sup>19</sup> Farmworkers are also in need of adequate childcare options that are affordable and can accommodate agricultural work schedules, which often begin very early in the morning.<sup>20</sup> These issues of availability, quality, and cost of childcare in rural and agricultural communities would be directly addressed by loan and grant programs outlined in the bipartisan *Expanding Childcare in Rural America Act*.<sup>21</sup> We also support the American Farm Bureau and the National Farmers Union

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<sup>19</sup> See 2023 National Farm Families Childcare Survey Findings at [https://marshfieldresearch.org/Media/Default/NFMC/2023\\_NationalFarmerandRancherChildcaresurvey\\_Researchbrief.pdf](https://marshfieldresearch.org/Media/Default/NFMC/2023_NationalFarmerandRancherChildcaresurvey_Researchbrief.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> See S.1867 - Expanding Childcare in Rural America Act of 2023 <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/1867/text?s=4&r=5&q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22Rural%22%2C%22Child%22%2C%22Care%22%5D%7D>



policy priority to ensure childcare is included in the 2023 Farm Bill, if these proposals can be modified to meet the needs of farmworkers and their families.

Our farm and food system relies heavily on farmworkers and their needs and priorities in the Farm Bill need to be considered. We look forward to working with you to advance these proposals and other changes to improve conditions for the essential workforce of farm and forestry workers.

Thank you for your attention to our views.

Sincerely,

Alianza Nacional de Campesinas, Inc.  
Rural Coalition

AFGE Local 3354  
Alabama State Association of Cooperatives  
American Indian Mothers Inc.  
Campaign for Family Farms and the Environment  
Campesinos Unidos de California  
Center for Food Safety  
Colonias Development Council  
Coming Clean  
Compañeras Campesinas  
Earthjustice  
Family Farm Defenders  
Farm Aid  
Grupo Amor  
HEAL Food Alliance  
Kansas Black Farmers Association  
Latino Farmers & Ranchers International, Inc.  
Líderes Campesinas  
MegaFood  
MESA  
National Young Farmers Coalition  
Natural Resources Defense Council  
Naturepedic Organic Mattresses  
New Mexico Food & Agriculture Policy Council  
Northwest Center for Alternatives to Pesticides  
Northwest Forest Worker Center  
Pequeños agricultores de California



Pesticide Action Network

Pocasset Pokanoket Land Trust

ROTBLOC LLC

Rural Advancement Fund of the National Sharecroppers Fund, Inc

Rural Development Leadership Network

RuralOrganizing.org Education Fund

Springfield Food Policy Council

Texas Coalition of Rural Landowners

The Wave Foundation

Toxic Free North Carolina