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October 29, 2003  
via fax

Honorable Thad Cochran, Chair  
Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and  
Forestry Committee  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Cochran:

During recent weeks, comprehensive agricultural guest worker and immigration reform legislation was introduced (S. 1645 and H.R. 3142). This legislation has been shaped by several years of legislative effort and negotiations among agricultural employer representatives and worker advocates.

My purpose in contacting you is to ask for your help in supporting this legislation and becoming a cosponsor of it. The Agricultural Jobs, Opportunity, Benefits, and Security (AgJOBS) Act of 2003 provides a two-step approach to ensuring a stable, legal, safe, agricultural work force. First, it will streamline and expand the H-2A guest worker program, and make it more affordable. Second, it will provide a one-time adjustment to legal status for experienced farm workers, already living and working here, who currently lack legal documentation. Both components are critically needed to handle the short-term and long-term needs of agriculture. Currently, the H-2A program provides only about three percent of the total agricultural work force.

As you may know, farmers in most regions of the United States have faced crisis-level shortages of entry level workers for many years. They cannot fill jobs with local workers, even when they offer pay levels considerably higher than minimum wage. Of the 1.6 million agricultural workers in our country, it is estimated that more than half are not legally authorized to work here, with some estimates going high as 75 percent. A dependable and legal supply of workers is absolutely essential to the survival of farming in the United States.

The National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA) represents the commissioners, secretaries, and directors of agriculture from all 50 states and four U.S. territories. NASDA's policy on agricultural labor addresses four areas of concern for all agricultural industries and mirrors the goals of this comprehensive legislation. NASDA policy and this legislation reflect concern for the basic rights of all agricultural workers; recognition that the current H-2A program does not serve as a viable means for addressing gaps in the local work force; the need for a trustworthy identification system for non-citizen workers; and the need to regularize the status of the existing work force. NASDA's policy statement is included with this letter.

In addition, NASDA has been actively involved with the Agriculture Coalition for Immigration Reform (ACIR), co-chaired by the National Council of Agricultural Employers and the American Nursery and



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NASDA is a nonprofit association of public officials comprised of the Commissioners, Secretaries, and Directors of agriculture in the fifty states and four territories

Landscape Association. It is noteworthy that both ACIR and numerous farm worker advocate groups support this legislation.

The AgJOBS bill is a good solution that helps secure our borders, provides a legal work force for agriculture, treats workers fairly and can be enacted with bipartisan support. We respectfully ask that you favorably consider this legislation and support its passage this year.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gene Hugoson".

Gene Hugoson  
NASDA President  
Minnesota Commissioner of Agriculture

attachment