

# Idaho farmers say they need this bill to hire workers. Senators likely killed it



Rachel Spacek, Idaho Statesman

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*Farmworkers in Idaho in 2021. | Idaho Statesman*

([Idaho Statesman](#)) — For 27 years, Maria has worked on farms near the Oregon-Idaho state line. In that time she’s been confined to stay near her home in Oregon, and missed her brother’s funeral in California and family visits in Mexico.

She just wants to feel “un poco libre” — a little bit free, she said by phone. Free enough, at least, to visit her brother’s grave in Indio, California. The site was where Immigration and Customs Enforcement found and deported her when she first came to the U.S., she said. Now, she’s afraid to return.

Maria is undocumented, doesn’t have a driver’s license, and can’t leave and reenter the U.S. She said she lives in constant fear of deportation, of never seeing her four children and of losing her job. The Idaho Statesman is not using Maria’s full name because of her immigration status.

Maria was one of 15 farmworkers who traveled to Washington, D.C., earlier this month with the United Farm Workers to push for [a bill that would create a path to citizenship](#) for agriculture employees. But any remaining hope for the reform likely died Thursday, when Congress passed a spending bill that excluded the proposal.

The House version of the bill — which was sponsored by U.S. Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho — passed last year with support from 34 Republicans. But bipartisan negotiations on the Senate bill fell through after U.S. Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, withdrew his support, splitting Idaho’s congressional delegation and farm industry leaders.

The Senate bill, called the Affordable and Secure Food Act, would have expanded the federal guest worker program to allow foreign workers to work in U.S. agriculture year-round, rather than just in the spring and summer seasons. It would have also created a path to legal permanent residency for undocumented immigrants who worked in agriculture for 10 years.

Maria and other Idaho farmworkers said they hoped the path to legal status would give them freedom to live without fear of deportation, while industry leaders said the bill would help increase the hiring pool for much-needed workers in agriculture.

The United Farm Workers union was hopeful early this week that the bill could be an added amendment to the omnibus spending bill, which passed Thursday afternoon without it.

For employees like Maria, the bill's failure could mean spending another four or more years living in fear of deportation. Maria and [about half](#) of all farmworkers in the U.S. are undocumented, without protections from the federal guest worker program.

"When you don't have papers, you're always thinking about the risks," Alicia Rojo, another Idaho farmworker who has traveled to Washington twice to advocate for the bill, said in Spanish. "You're worried that if you go to work, you might not come back."

## Demand for workers increases

Farmers have been [struggling to find workers](#) in the past several years, a struggle worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent labor shortage.

Local demand for foreign workers has increased "exponentially," said Joel Anderson, executive director of Snake River Farmers Association, in an interview with the Statesman in July. The association helps agricultural employers hire through the guest worker program. Anderson said that in the summer, Idaho farmers who typically did not use the federal program applied because they needed workers to fill in gaps.

Idaho dairies have a unique problem. They also face a labor shortage and cannot use the federal program because they need workers all through the year, instead of seasonally, which makes the shortage even more difficult to combat.

Rick Naerebout, executive director of the Idaho Dairymen's Association, [has supported](#) the expansion of the program to allow dairies to use foreign workers and the path to legal status for undocumented workers.

"That cow-to-worker ratio has increased," Naerebout told the Statesman in July. "The rule of thumb is one worker per 100 cows. If you do the math, our workforce now is about one worker for 140 cows."

The Senate bill was a compromise between the agriculture industry and the [United Farm Workers of America](#), a labor union that has historically opposed expansion of the guest worker program. The union views the program as a "space for more abuse and violations of human rights," said United Farm Workers President Teresa Romero in [a news release from February 2021](#).

Crapo said he heard the cry from Idaho farmers and began bipartisan negotiations on the bill. He had been working with Sen. Michael Bennet, D-Colorado, to craft a bill that would expand the federal program and protect undocumented farmworkers after 10 years.

But Crapo and Bennet faced an impasse earlier this month. Crapo pulled back on negotiations, but his office declined to say why.

"Sen. Crapo and Sen. Bennet were not able to reach a bipartisan agreement on critical employer-related components of the bill, despite their best efforts," said Marissa Morrison, spokesperson for Crapo's office.

The American Farm Bureau Federation, a national organization that represents farmers, opposed the bill in the House, citing the wage rates of foreign workers. The bill would have frozen wages at the 2022 rates for one year,

which varies state by state, and capped future increases by 3%.

After Bennet got the final word that Crapo would not support the bill, he introduced it himself earlier this month. It did not get a vote on the Senate floor.

Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho, said he would have supported Bennet's bill "if it was better than what we've currently got," he told the Statesman by phone. He said he trusts that Crapo tried to negotiate the best version of the bill, without success.

"Mike negotiated, but it kept going backwards," Risch said. "Mike indicated to me that Bennet would just not agree on the kinds of things that needed to be in the bill."

Idaho Rep. Russ Fulcher [voted no](#) on the House bill in March 2021.

The United Farm Workers hoped the bill would pass before the end of the year, because with Republicans taking over the House next year, they are unlikely to hear a bill related to immigration, [Politico reported](#).

The Food Producers of Idaho, Idaho Dairymen's Association, Idaho Cattle Association, Idaho Grain Producers Association, Snake River Sugarbeet Growers Association, Amalgamated Sugar Co. and a dozen other growers signed on to [a news release](#) from Simpson's office on Monday, calling on the Senate to include the Affordable and Secure Food Act in the year-end spending bill.

In [a news release last week](#), Simpson urged the Senate to support the bill to reform the H-2A guest worker program and provide farmers with a stable workforce.

"This bill offers comprehensive solutions to the complex workforce problems facing agriculture," Simpson said [in the release](#). "It reforms the costly and cumbersome H-2A guestworker program. ... It tackles the long-standing challenge of providing a stable, legal agriculture workforce by bringing the millions of undocumented farm workers in the U.S. out from the shadows of our immigration system so they can get right with the law."

Farmworkers said they'll continue to fight for the bill and remain resilient, having endured [extreme heat](#), [pesticide exposure](#) and [injuries](#) on the job. Rojo was injured during an onion harvest in Canyon County when her arm was caught in machinery and broken in four places, she said. She described her arm as a towel that had been wrung out.

The bill's failure "doesn't stop us from continuing to forge ahead," Rojo said. "Because life is about finding solutions and not giving up."

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10 hours ago



How about become a citizen legally? How about the United States government starts enforcing the immigration laws that are already there?

How is that racist?

Hmmm...


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**Amy Lancaster** ...

1 hour ago

The process to become a legal citizen is lengthy and complicated. The temporary workers who work for our food and agriculture are here legally and doing the work that very few citizens are willing to do and they choose it to make ends meet for their family because policies in the 90s killed their self reliance. Educate yourself before passing judgement. Would you do any means necessary to provide for your family?

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**Idaho** ...

10 hours ago

Funny how racist and anti-immigrant Idaho Republicans are, until they don't have enough potato pickers. 😂 Buncha hypocrites.

*(Edited)*

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