

During the F& V Labor subcommittee call on February 17, 2015, Oscar Gonzales noted that there would be a multi-agency meeting between USDA and DOL for the purpose of discussing how the two (2) agencies could work closer together to ensure that the H2-A program was a better tool for agriculture. It was suggested by the members of the Labor Subcommittee that someone from the subcommittee attend this meeting. Today, March 4, 2015, the meeting was held in Washington, DC and I attended as an industry member whose company is actively involved in the H2-A guest worker program.

In the final scheduling of this meeting, it was determined by Oscar, USDA and industry personnel that this first meeting should not include DOL personnel. It would be more important and effective now to identify and discuss all current issues, develop a plan to assess each as noted, and then schedule meeting(s) with DOL at a future date.

Representatives from USDA at this meeting included:

- **Oscar Gonzales** – FSA-California
- **Alex Jacquez** – OSEC
- **David Grahn** – USDA Office of General Counsel
- **Joy Harwood** – Farm Service Agency
- **Peter Feather** – USDA Office of Chief Economist
- **Tom Hertz** – USDA National Economic Research Service
- **Sheila Corley** – USDA National Ag Statistics Service

Representatives from agriculture industry included:

- **Frank Gasperini** – Executive Vice President/CEO – National Council of Agricultural Employers (NCAE)
- **Fred Leitz**. A fruit and vegetable farmer from Sodus, MI and currently serving as elected President of NCAE
- **Mike Carlton**. Director of Labor Relations Division for Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association (FFVA.)
- **Ricke Kress**. President of Southern Gardens Citrus located in Clewiston, FL.
- **Maureen Torrey**. Torrey Farms, NY. Fruit, vegetable, and dairy producer and agricultural leader in NY State and beyond.
- **Kelli Griffith**. Executive Director, Mountain Plains Agricultural Service, Casper, WY. An H-2A Association serving almost 300 members in 16 Western states, specializing in sheep, goat, and beef industries including open range.

- **Lynn Jacquez** – NCAE attorney with DC law firm with extensive history of government involvement.

Going into the meeting, there were three (3) key points that NCAE and FFVA wanted to emphasize in conjunction with the current H2-A program:

1. US agriculture is experiencing a reduction in available workforce.
2. USDA and DOL must develop a closer and more productive working relationship.
3. Must address and improve current DOL negative attitude towards agriculture.

As was discussed in the last Labor Subcommittee call, the individual specific issues that have been encountered as summarized by NCAE and FFVA were the basis for the points of discussion during the meeting. This information was provided to the USDA personnel and is attached for your information. In addition to the summary of issues, it was emphasized that there needs to be assurances that in the future, the Chicago National Processing Center personnel are declared “essential” personnel in the event of another government shutdown.

At the conclusion of the meeting, Oscar Gonzales noted that based on the content of the meeting as presented and discussed, we were able to establish a key list of next steps for consideration going forward, which include the following:

- Based on the current structure of the H2-A program as mandated, USDA has the ability to be involved and must become more engaged in the program.
- Using this meeting as a basis, there are many areas that need to be openly and proactively discussed with DOL. USDA and industry personnel at these meeting(s) in the future, will be a key part of this process and objectives going forward.
- Given the importance of agriculture and a safe and adequate food supply in the US, there will be a point in time to solicit assistance and support from appropriate Congressional personnel.
- While there are varying forms of immigration reform being discussed, it should be assumed that no formal legislative action will occur and therefore, a plan to address short and long term issues and goals between USDA and DOL should be established.

As a closing point in the meeting, Oscar Gonzales indicated that he was meeting with Secretary Vilsack at 1:00 pm today, March 4, 2015 and will convey the points and concerns of industry that need to be addressed related to the H2-A program.

From my perspective based on the discussions to date of the Labor Subcommittee, the content of the meeting at USDA today, and the stated intentions going forward of Oscar Gonzales and the USDA personnel, we as a subcommittee will now be in a position to recommend to the F&V committee that we support and request that the USDA become more involved in the H2-A program and become the direct advocate for the program to the US agriculture industry.