



'Motivated and angry' drown out ag leaders' voices

(Aug. 17) SAN ANTONIO — Texas produce industry leaders are having a tough time convincing their majority Republican Congressional delegation of the need for immigration reform that addresses an agricultural workers component.

Calling for border security, a guest worker program and a “reasonable” path to legal status for the more than 12 million illegal workers in the U.S., the industry heard from two well-known advocates of immigration reform.



Charlie Stenholm (left), former Democratic U.S. Congressman from Texas; John McClung, president of the Texas Produce Association; and Bhimu Patil, director of Texas A&M University's Vegetable and Fruit Improvement Center, College Station, talk Aug. 11 at the annual Texas Produce Convention.

Former Texas Rep. Charlie Stenholm, who was one of the conservative Democrats in the “Blue Dog Coalition,” and Tamar Jacoby, senior fellow at the New York-based Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, both addressed the immigration reform issue during the annual Texas Produce Convention on Aug. 10-12.

Both called for a national identification card that would allow employers to check the status of potential employees. As it is, employers can't reject workers based on the assumption they're using ill-gotten documents.

“We have to replace this ‘nudge, nudge, wink, wink’ system that we have now, that you all live with, with a legal system,” Jacoby said.

Jacoby, who's appeared on national news programs advocating a guest worker's program, said the voices of business leaders, including those in agriculture, are being drowned out by the “motivated and angry” 25% of the population against any legislation allowing illegal immigrants to remain in the U.S. That vocal majority is in opposition to President Bush's desire.

“The president understands this, down to every fiber of his being, and he wants to make this (guest worker program) happen,” Jacoby said.

Stenholm, whose 26 years in Washington, D.C. included ranking-member status on the House Agriculture Committee, had some harsh words for grower-shippers during an Aug. 11 luncheon. Knowing that he was addressing a group that tends to vote for Republican lawmakers, Stenholm blasted “religious separatists” in the GOP for using hot-button issues like gay marriage and abortion to tie up movement on any number of issues, including the farm bill.

He also took the specialty crops industry to task for its inability to band together in the past.

“You in the fruit and vegetable industry weren’t happy with everything (Congress) did, and I will tell you, as I’ve told you many times, that’s your fault,” Stenholm said. “ ... You’re working against each other in the marketplace.”

However, Stenholm, now a lobbyist with Washington, D.C., law firm Olsson, Frank and Weeda PC, commended the industry for its work on the Fruit and Vegetable Snack Program, which has seen increases in appropriations.

Among the convention’s various sessions were those addressing fruit and vegetable pest concerns, health research, irrigation needs and ethnic marketing.

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