

Joint Public Hearing on Agriculture Workforce Availability
Senate Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee
Senate Labor & Industry Committee
Testimony of Christian R. Herr
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My name is Christian Herr and I am the Executive Vice President of PennAg Industries Association. PennAg represents more than 650 farms and agribusinesses in Pennsylvania.

Let me begin by thanking Chairmen Brubaker and Gordner and all of the members of the Agriculture and Rural Affairs and Labor & Industry Committees for hosting this hearing today.

In the current political climate there would be easier issues on which to host a hearing. As this is such a heated and emotional issue, it takes great leadership to bring it to the forefront – so on behalf of our members, thank you for making it a priority.

This morning you have heard from several of PennAg's members. They provided personal accounts of the importance of having reliable and dedicated employees to milk their cows, take care of their hogs and chickens, harvest the vegetables and fruits and process the products that we all take for granted when we visit our local supermarket.

It's evident by this morning's testimonies that this is a very personal issue for the agricultural community. Our farmers and producers not only care about their farms and businesses, they also care about the workers. Those feelings are not always apparent in the rhetoric surrounding this discussion.

At a recent forum on this issue hosted by the Lancaster County League of Women Voters, a panel speaker, who happened to also be a member of the Legislature, suggested that "to get rid of the problem we need to get rid of the jobs." During the question and answer portion of the program I asked him if he really meant that we should get rid of agriculture sector jobs, implying that we take our food production and processing off-shore. He assured me that that is what he meant.

You have heard a lot about the "essential worker" at this hearing today. You have heard how difficult it is to find reliable employees who are willing to work in the agriculture production and processing sector. You have also learned about the wages and benefits received by this section of the work force.

We know that American farmers and processors provide the safest, most diverse and most affordable food in the world. We have this luxury because of the dedication of the farmers and agribusinesses in this country. Their workers deserve equal credit.

Sustaining our level of productivity and the quality of the food produced is largely dependent on the availability of workers in the industry. We believe that if agricultural workforce availability were limited, it is not just the Pennsylvania producer that would suffer, but ultimately the consumer.

We believe that it is an issue of national security to be able to provide home grown and processed food to the American people. To do that, we must have constructive rhetoric about the people who help raise and process that food. We would encourage the Senate to help to develop a guest worker program that is practical, efficient and flexible in length.

I congratulate these two committees today for being willing to constructively address this issue. PennAg Industries looks forward to working with you towards that end.