

# Fight COVID-19 by Supporting Farmworkers and Truckers

By: [Richard M. Blau](#), Chairman  
[Nationwide Alcohol Beverage](#) and [Food Law Department](#)



The recently-floated proposal to cut farmworker wages as a means of helping shore-up the nation's food supply during the COVID-19 pandemic is both misguided and counterproductive. Now more than ever, federal, state and local governments need to expand support for the farm workers who harvest the nation's food, as well as the truckers who transport those harvests and keep the country's food distribution system operating.

As if the trade war with China was not burden enough, the COVID-19 pandemic has put new stresses on America's food production system. Harvesters are trying to prepare for the Spring harvest season in many southern states even as they now face growing labor shortages due to coronavirus contagion. Since 2006, the number of H-2A visas has multiplied from less than 50,000 to more than 200,000 today.

Guest workers constitute almost 10% of the nation's agricultural workforce, and some experts expect that figure could double. Farmers' challenges include: (i) streamlining the issuance of enough H-2A (temporary agricultural worker) visas to meet the growing demand for more farmworkers; (ii) improving access to basic food supplies for migrating farmworkers traveling from harvest to harvest across our nation; and (iii) providing farmworkers (both domestic and H2A guest workers) with safe, CDC-compliant working conditions, living quarters where relevant, and access to proper medical care to curb the spread of the disease among harvesters.

In the midst of these challenges, President Donald Trump reportedly is directing Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue to develop a plan for reducing wage rates for over 200,000 foreign guest workers harvesting on American farms, in order to help U.S. farm owners struggling during the coronavirus outbreak. Cutting the wages of those we rely on to harvest our food is the wrong way to approach this challenge.



The nation's roughly 2.5 million agricultural laborers have been officially declared "essential workers." As America moves forward through the pandemic, all Americans need their federal, state and local leaders to protect the people who are critical to securing and maintaining our access to our nation's food supplies – farm workers and truckers.

Social distancing guidelines, local sheltering orders, and support for officially-designated essential workers, including our communities' first responders and medical personnel, will pull us through this terrible pandemic. Equally important are the often unseen heroes – the everyday heroes who work to produce and deliver the abundant harvests, stocked grocery shelves and community food banks that we often take for granted. As a former chairman of the board for Feeding Tampa Bay, I know first-hand how important food

banks are to our communities in a time of crisis. I also appreciate how much our food banks rely on agriculture and transportation workers.

While Congress has moved quickly and with bi-partisanship to pass the CARES Act, the real work will be in the administration of this new legislation's vast, \$2 trillion funding. Efforts to flatten the COVID-19 curve are paramount, but so are the economic grants, loans and support that are essential to preserving state economies and reducing the risks of putting even more Americans out of work.

Protecting essential workers is vital to ensuring that our nation has the goods and services to help us get through this globally challenging time. **That needs to go for farm workers and truckers as well.** Unlike so many of us, farm workers and truckers do not have the option to telecommute. This is especially important for our nation's most important agricultural states.



Take Florida for example. Florida has one of the largest agricultural work forces in America. As we move through Florida's Spring growing season, between 150,000 and 200,000 domestic and foreign-guest farm workers are laboring to harvest and process the crops that ultimately feed us and bolster our state's economy. To keep that important agricultural lifeline going, federal, state and local officials need to work with Florida's growers and food industry companies to keep farm workers healthy.

At the federal level, the U.S. State Department has issued an emergency order temporarily waiving the personal interview requirement to obtain H-2A agricultural guest worker permits. But matching that step forward with a federal initiative to cut those workers' wages at a time when the work is more needed (and dangerous) than ever is completely misguided.

Florida (along with other key agricultural states such as Georgia, Oregon and Washington State) relies on tens of thousands of H-2A guest farm workers each year to harvest all manner of fruit, nut, legume and vegetable crops, as well as for processing livestock. **The smart move?** The U.S. Department of Agriculture should disburse some of the \$23.5 billion that Congress appropriated specifically for food producers under the CARES Act to farmers for paying workers a fair wage, improving work conditions to comply with CDC guidelines, and providing health care to the men and women who harvest the food we eat. Equally important: farmers, ranchers and food processors should use those CARES Act funds to do their part. To drive that point home, the Food and Beverage Alliance, a collaboration between 58 U.S.-based food & beverage trade associations, has started #FeedingUS, a campaign to encourage the adoption of nationwide safety guidelines for screening food industry employees for coronavirus, the use of social distancing and face masks at food production and processing facilities, and protocols for when employees test positive.

State officials need to engage on this issue as well. In every state across America, the governor, state agriculture secretary, and even the state's Surgeon General should expand the coordination of public efforts with private farm owners, growers and processors to assure that: (i) farm workers receive their fair share of the government funds appropriated for emergency sick care; and (ii) ag-industry owners and growers provide the state's farm workers safe working conditions that are fully consistent with the most current COVID-19 guidelines.

LIKEWISE, America’s truckers – especially the independent contractors – deserve our support during these difficult times. Distributors are trying to maintain transportation networks to deliver food to grocery stores and other food outlets, including charitable food banks and community food pantries. Currently, Americans rely on a legion of over 3.5 million commercial transport drivers to ferry our harvested food and processed livestock to grocery stores and other food outlets across the nation.



Their challenges include: (i) the need to expand support for CDL truck drivers as state rest areas, local truck stops and most restaurants have been closing or restricting hours of operation during the coronavirus outbreak; (ii) protecting truck drivers with adequate supplies of personal protection equipment; and (iii) working to assure that suppliers loading goods and receivers unloading goods practice CDC compliant practices to avoid contaminating distribution truckers and their vehicles.

All across Florida, truckers are delivering food, medicine and other critical supplies during this national emergency. For their benefit, state highway rest areas need to be sanitized and maintained. Equally important, state and local officials need to step up their work with private truck stop operators to assure that those roadside retailers and service stations stay open, and that they stay safe through compliance with COVID-19 directives and CDC guidelines.

Washington’s latest shoot-from-the-hip concept of fighting COVID-19 by cutting the pay of the people who harvest our food is irrational. It’s also inhumane, and even dangerous in terms of increasing rather than reducing the risks of contagion. The smarter, safer and economically better approach is to address the basic needs and protections required by America’s farm workers, and truckers, so that they can stay healthy and continue to produce and deliver the food we all need to stay safe.



*Richard Blau is the chairman of the Alcohol Beverage and Food Law Department of **GrayRobinson, P.A.**, and a past chairman of the board of Feeding Tampa Bay - part of the national Feeding America network that focuses on providing food to the hundreds of thousands of food-insecure families in the 10-county area of West Central Florida.*