

By Kenric Ward

Immigration and invasive pests topped a lengthy list of concerns of Florida farm leaders on Friday.

Meeting in West Palm Beach with U.S. Reps. Allen West, R-Plantation, and Jack Kingston, R-Ga., agricultural representatives called for a guest-worker program to ensure timely and cost-effective crop harvesting.

"We have to close the border first. National security is the No. 1 issue and we need to return sanity to Washington, D.C.," said Rick Roth, owner of Roth Farms.

But beyond that, the Palm Beach County grower said the federal government must overhaul its H-2A agricultural work visa program.

Roth and others complained that the H-2A program is "not user friendly."

"It's run by the Department of Labor, which is anti-agriculture," declared Roth, who noted that H-2A requires employers to provide round-trip transportation, free housing and wages "far above the domestic rate."

"It only works with a long growing season and thousands and thousands of acres to harvest," said Roth, who grows vegetables, rice and sugar cane.

Responding to estimates that U.S. farm labor costs up to 10 times more than the pay earned by field hands overseas, Kingston is sponsoring a proposal to move H-2A to the U.S. Department of Agriculture and reform the program.

Farmers also lobbied for easier issuance of green cards.

"For applicants, it really should come down to just two questions: Have you ever worked in agriculture before, and do you have someone who will hire you?" Roth suggested.

West said the "biggest issue is to balance national security and a legal work force."

"We used to recruit seasonal workers, and we have to make sure we do the right thing. I don't want to see us outsourcing our food as we have done to our energy resources," the congressman told Sunshine State News.

West, like many in House leadership, has been wary of E-Verify legislation that would require employers to screen new hires.

"Everyone admits we need a strong verification system, but we don't want to put the industry in a tough situation," West said, adding there has to be "some control" over migrant work forces.

"We need to look at individuals who are already here -- they cannot continue to have a free ride on health and education. Everyone has to have skin in the game," he said.

Meanwhile, Florida crops are facing an ongoing threat from foreign insects -- introduced into the state at the rate of one species a month.

Riding in on imported crops and containers, these pests can wreak havoc on the environment and domestic foodstuffs, agriculturalists say.

Large and small Florida growers urged Congress to pass provisions in the pending farm bill to tighten inspections of imported produce. They said tomatoes and lettuce are particularly susceptible to insect damage, and that research is needed to proactively combat new breeds of pests before they arrive.

"Anything that comes into Florida will live here," Roth observed. "It's not a question of if they'll come, it's a question of when."

With roughly half of the fruits and vegetables consumed in the United States imported from overseas -- and sizable quantities shipped through Florida ports -- West said he and Kingston will write a joint letter to the USDA and the World Trade Organization detailing concerns over the dumping of cheap produce, particularly from Mexico.

Kingston chairs the Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture and Rural Development.

On a smorgasbord of other ag-related issues, West pledged to work with farmers to combat the negative effects of Dodd-Frank financial legislation on community banks; overturn business-killing tax and regulation policies at the federal level; and help small farmers compete for insurance policies like larger corporations.

Critical of President Barack Obama's policies ranging from health care to water-quality standards, West said the agriculture industry would be best served if the country "gets a new president and a new administration."

A representative of the citrus industry praised West's comments.

"Congressman West gets it, he understands us," said Doug Bournique with Indian River Citrus. Local farmers, he said, "feel very comfortable knowing our interests are being taken seriously."

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