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Committee on Agriculture

Subcommittee on Biotechnology, Horticulture and Research

Specialty Crops in the Next Farm Bill

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Testimony of:

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Thank you Chairman Davis, Ranking Member Grisham and all members of the subcommittee for the opportunity to share my thoughts about the treatment of specialty crops under the Farm Bill. This subcommittee's work to promote specialty crops -- and on crafting federal policies that allow providers to be competitive in the marketplace -- is appreciated by fresh fruit and vegetable providers across the country.

First, a bit about myself and the business I represent. My name is James Field. I am the Director of Business Development for Frey Farms, headquartered in Keenes, IL. Frey Farms specializes in growing, packing, and shipping fresh market fruits and vegetables. We are best known as the nation's largest fresh pumpkin producer. Our farms and facilities are located in Florida, Georgia, Missouri, Arkansas, Indiana, West Virginia, and Illinois.

Frey Farms is a member of the United Fresh Produce Association, which represents growers, shippers, processors and sellers of fresh fruits and vegetables across the country. The CEO of Frey Farms, Sarah Frey, has served on United Fresh's Government Relations Council and is a member of its board of directors.

Through United Fresh and on our own, Frey Farms has actively engaged with policymakers on a variety of issues that impact the

specialty crop sector, including the Farm Bill, so we are thankful for the opportunity to share our perspective on Farm Bill programs that impact our ability to do business.

Before we discuss Farm Bill programs, it is not possible to give a full and accurate perspective on federal policies that most affect our sector without mentioning immigration. Frey Farms participates in the H-2A program. Administered by the Department of Labor, H-2A is the only federal program through which agriculture employers can recruit seasonal agricultural guest-workers. We do our best to make the program work for our operation, but it is very difficult. Frequently we, like other participants in the program, do not get the adequate number of workers we need in a timely manner. Given the highly time-sensitive nature of harvesting fruits and vegetables, it is essential to get workers when we need them.

According to the National Council of Agricultural Employers (NCAE), the H-2A program provides approximately 150,000 guest-workers a year – or only 10 percent of the nearly 1.5 million seasonal ag workers needed in this country. Yet, the program is being used in increasing numbers -- doubling the last five years – in a trend that is expected to continue.

The vast majority of farm land in this great nation is located in rural communities, far away from the larger labor pools needed to fill the jobs that are necessary for harvesting specialty crops. The seasonality of harvesting specialty crops also poses a tremendous hurdle in recruiting an adequate domestic workforce. In order to maintain a steady supply of fresh fruits and vegetables, farming moves across the country rapidly with the changing of the seasons. Many of the specialty crops grown in the United States have harvest windows as short as a few weeks due to the geographic location and regional climates associated with the farmland. Relocating a domestic family every few weeks is logistically unfeasible. Therefore, the lack of access to domestic labor, combined with an overburdened federal guest-worker program means fruit and vegetable providers are in a near daily struggle to secure an adequate workforce. There is a high level of uncertainty in agriculture right now as it relates to the future of migratory workers.

The reality is this: The vast majority of the nation's foreign-born farm workers do not have proper work authorization and the emphasis on enforcement without an accompanying *effective legal* ag guest-worker program, puts our industry, and our Nation's ability to sustainably and affordably feed our people, in jeopardy.

I want to be clear: we support strengthening our nation's ability to uphold the law.

We want our workforce to be legally authorized to work in this country, and this is why Frey Farms, and the produce industry as a whole, have long advocated for reforms to our nation's immigration system to deal with this issue.

I want to express that we at Frey Farms, and the agriculture industry at large, would like to work with you, and other law makers, to find solutions. We believe those who are working in agriculture without proper documentation should be able to make their presence known and join the H-2A program. When their seasonal harvest work is finished, these workers would return to their home country as the current H-2A program requires and transportation would be provided for by their American employer. Moreover, the legality of these working immigrants would no longer be in question and the regulations for proper execution of the law would firmly be in place. These workers would be allowed to return under the lawful rules of the H-2A program and the American farmer could operate without the stress and anxiety of wondering where their next group of laborers will come from.

Without the farm labor we need, we cannot deliver produce items to the people of our country. Fresh fruits and vegetables are left to rot in fields every year due to the lack of a reliable labor pool. Given that approximately 80 percent of the Farm Bill budget goes to supporting supplemental nutrition programs, more commonly known as food stamps, this is an egregious offense to the people of this country. Allowing fresh food to go to waste is not a problem that solely affects our industry, but impacts each and every American.

Farmers are inherently trying to provide healthy, sustainable, and competitively priced fresh fruits and vegetables, while working against the factor of time and the perishable nature of these very items. H-2A is however slow, inefficient, and riddled with bureaucratic inefficiencies the H-2A program may be, it is the only workforce solution that we have. The foundation is in place to help agriculture bridge the gap between its current supply and the vastly disparate demand for labor. We recognize that immigration policy does not pass through this committee – but it most certainly affects the day-to-day business viability of the men and women who supply most of America's fresh produce, dairy, and horticultural commodities. Given your support on past measures, we know that is important to you.

We urge you to do what it takes to ensure that whatever immigration legislation Congress debates does not become final without a mechanism for addressing agriculture's real and urgent labor needs. Failure to address these needs will undermine all the good work you have done to support specialty crops through legislation like the Farm Bill -- and ultimately -- you would fail to serve the farmers and ranchers this subcommittee is designated to represent. I, and many others in the produce community, do not believe that is what you want to do.

By ensuring agriculture's labor concerns are met, you will show once again that you recognize how important this sector is to the overall well-being of America, just as you did when you passed a Farm Bill and invested heavily in programs designed to allow produce providers to act on their own initiative and be competitive. I'd like to elaborate on a few of those Farm Bill programs and urge your continued support for them.

Since 2002, United Fresh has coordinated the Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance, a group of nearly 120 organizations nationwide that represent almost every specialty crop commodity produced in this country.

The purpose of the Alliance is to review the Farm Bill and make recommendations about programs most relevant to specialty crops. The Alliance identified a few basic thematic priorities in the most recent Farm Bill: market competitiveness, research, nutrition, international market access and pest and disease control. These priorities further our goals to increase consumption of fruits and vegetables by promoting the nutritional and economic well-being of Americans. They also provide tools and services that growers generally cannot control themselves.

In the past, the Alliance assessed prior program funding levels and current program usage and gave Congress funding recommendations for the programs that met these basic priorities. In the 2014 Farm Bill, the Agriculture Committee acted on those recommendations to provide:

- \$75 million annually for the Animal Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) Section 10201 program. This helps prevent the introduction or spread of plant pests and diseases that threaten U.S. agriculture and the environment, while ensuring the availability of a healthy supply of clean plant stock;

- \$9 million annually for the Technical Assistance for Specialty Crops (TASC) program and \$20 million for the Market Access Program

(MAP). Both of these programs are designed to address various barriers to agriculture exports;

-\$184 million for the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, or FFVP, which provides a fresh fruit or vegetable snack to four million low-income elementary school students in all 50 states. In Illinois, where Frey Farms is headquartered, the program allocates 5.4 million dollars to provide such snacks to more than 107,000 students. As the Members of the Subcommittee may be aware, FFVP has been evaluated by outside experts and found to be highly effective at increasing students' fresh fruit and vegetable consumption;

-\$75 million annually for the Specialty Crop Block Grant program to enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops. The 2014 Farm Bill also authorized funding for multi-state block grants; and

-\$80 million in annual funding for the Specialty Crop Research Initiative to develop and disseminate science-based tools to address the needs of specific crops and their regions.

These programs have been effective in helping fresh produce providers to deliver on their mission to ensure that all Americans have access to an abundant and affordable supply of nutritious fresh fruits and vegetables.

We in the produce sector are aware that Congress must address a great many pressing needs across America. But few initiatives are as important, or pay such dividends as helping Americans enjoy the health benefits of fresh fruits and vegetables. Given your past support for these initiatives, it is clear that this subcommittee understands this.

On behalf of the fresh produce industry, I urge you to continue the progress we have made together by ensuring that these programs are maintained and are not cut below their current funding levels.

The produce industry also looks forward to working with you to address agriculture's needs on issues such as trade, infrastructure and implementation of the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA).

All of these issues also go right to the heart of whether a produce provider can stay in business or not, so your time, attention and support on these matters is very much appreciated. I reiterate again however, that no program or policy is more critical and vital to the continued success of agricultural legislation as that of the H-2A program and immigration. I thank you on behalf of Frey Farms, and the agricultural community as a whole, for the continued work and service that you dedicate to our livelihoods.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts about the Farm Bill programs most important to the specialty crop sector, and on the pressing need of immigration reform. As I stated before, reforms to our nation's immigration system to provide a steady and reliable stream of guest workers has the power to make or break our industry. This is why we are looking to you for more than just support; we are looking for *action* on agricultural immigration reform. This subcommittee's efforts to enact meaningful specialty crop programs in the Farm Bill has not gone unnoticed. We know that we have friends here who want our industry to succeed, and we want to work with you to guarantee that future success.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I will be happy to take questions from you.