Agriculture Needs H-2A Reform This Congress

The National Watermelon Association is a nonprofit, membership association shaping the watermelon industry for future generations. We are the voice of the watermelon industry in the U.S., with hundreds of members representing growers, shippers, and key suppliers.

The Association appreciates the ongoing efforts of Congress and the Administration to address the agricultural labor crisis and modernize the H-2A program. In particular, we commend the U.S. House Agriculture Committee Chairman Glenn "GT" Thompson (PA-15), Rep. Don Davis (NC-01), and sixty-one bipartisan cosponsors for introducing H.R. 9535, the Securing Agriculture's Workforce Act of 2026. Building on the recommendations of the House Agriculture Committee's bipartisan Agricultural Labor Working Group, the bill addresses many longstanding needs of watermelon producers. We encourage Congress to pass H.R. 9535 before the end of this Congress. The bill represents meaningful progress toward modernizing the H-2A program.

As the legislation advances, the National Watermelon Association encourages Congress and the Administration to prioritize the following:

- **H-2A Wage Reform:** Growers need predictable, reasonable wages. H.R. 9535 would create a new AEWR methodology and cap annual increases at 3.25%. We also urge consideration of rolling back the sharp increases from 2022 to 2025.
- **Joint Employment:** Labor crews often move across farms, sectors, and state lines. H.R. 9535 would let agricultural associations, cooperatives, and joint employers file jointly. Keep this flexibility.
- **Year-Round Access:** Many specialty crop growers have year-round labor needs. H.R. 9535 would define temporary employment as fewer than 350 days. Retain this provision.
- **No Mid-Contract Wage Adjustments:** Growers must be able to plan their largest cost, especially under multi-season contracts. H.R. 9535 would prohibit mid-contract adjustments.
- **Streamlined Applications:** H.R. 9535 would create one online portal across four federal departments to reduce duplicative paperwork. It would also set processing deadlines for the Departments of Labor and Homeland Security.
- **De Minimis Exemption:** Adopt a de minimis exemption from the AEWR.
- **Path to Legal Status:** Experienced agricultural workers and their families need a path to legal status. H.R. 9535 takes a step by authorizing limited waivers for experienced workers seeking H-2A classification, but it does not create a permanent pathway.

With the end of this Congress approaching, the National Watermelon Association encourages Congress to pass H.R. 9535 this year and to continue working toward a modernized agricultural labor system that provides employers with reliable, affordable, and flexible access to the workforce American agriculture depends on.