

# Agriculture & IMMIGRATION

POLICY BRIEF

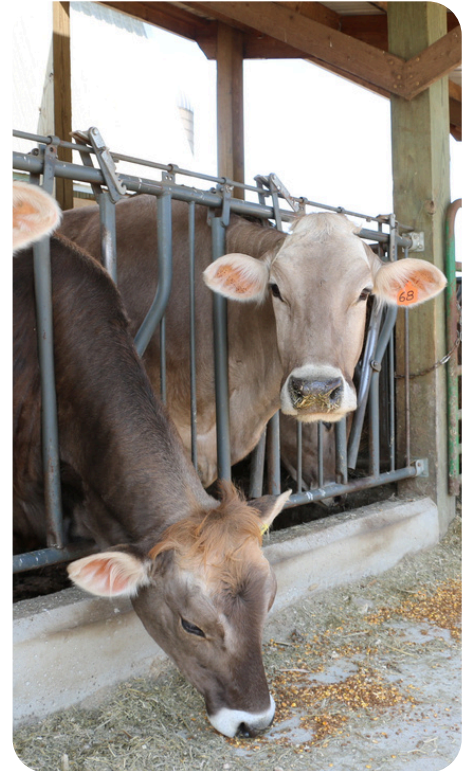
**An estimated 73% of U.S. agriculture workers today were born outside of the United States.<sup>1</sup>** Immigrants are integral to the success of Wisconsin agriculture. A feasible route for temporary workers to stay in the US year-round is essential to meeting the workforce demands of Wisconsin farms.

## THE FUTURE OF WI AGRICULTURE

The future of Wisconsin agriculture depends on comprehensive immigration reform that includes a plan for permanent guest workers. Immigrants make up about 5.9% of Wisconsin's workforce and account for about 11% of the state's agricultural workers.<sup>2</sup> The Wisconsin Farmers Union calls on legislators to take into account the critical role that immigrant labor plays in maintaining agricultural output and to enact laws that meet farmers' labor demands while upholding the rights and humanity of workers.

## RURAL POPULATION DECLINE

Population decline in rural areas is accelerating in the United States. Between 2000 and 2020, departures from rural counties outweighed new arrivals by 700,000 people.<sup>3</sup> 77% of U.S. rural counties have fewer working-age people, ages 15 to 64, than 20 years ago. Rural population declines are expected to continue. For over 150 years, dairy farming has been a vital part of Wisconsin's economy. In 1960, the state was home to approximately 100,000 dairy farms, with an average herd size of just 21 cows. By early 2024, however, the number of dairy farms had significantly decreased to around 5,386, with the average herd size growing to 235 cows per farm.<sup>4</sup> As rural populations in Wisconsin have dwindled over the years, immigrants have increasingly filled the workforce on these larger farms, playing a crucial role in sustaining the dairy industry.



## WFU STANDS AGAINST MASS DEPORTATION

Immigration policy should reflect the values of justice and respect for the essential contributions that immigrants make to our communities and economy. According to the National Milk Producers Federation, **dairies that employ immigrants are responsible for 79% of the U.S. milk supply.<sup>5</sup>** A 2023 UW-Madison School for Workers survey found that **over 10,000 undocumented workers perform around 70% of the labor on Wisconsin's dairy farms.<sup>6</sup>** "Without them, the whole dairy industry would collapse overnight," the researchers concluded. A sudden mass deportation policy would not only disrupt the lives of hardworking individuals and families but could also have **devastating effects on our agricultural industry and rural communities.** Wisconsin's farms could face significant challenges in filling these critical roles, which would lead to broader economic consequences and even further loss of farms.

## PERMANENT GUEST WORKER PROGRAM

To address the labor needs of Wisconsin agriculture, **a long-term, year-round guest worker program must be established.** The H-2A visa program and other current immigration laws are insufficient for businesses like dairy farming that need workers all year round. Operations that require a steady, ongoing labor force are not supported by the H-2A program, which was created for seasonal employment.

Employees should be able to stay in the United States for extended periods of time under a permanent guest worker program, with the option to leave and return without endangering their job status. **Reforming the visa system** will allow critical workers to travel for personal reasons without worrying about being denied re-entry. This will give agricultural operations greater stability and contribute to the improvement of worker well-being.

## FAIR IMMIGRATION REFORM

The Wisconsin Farmers Union is in favor of comprehensive immigration reform, which includes the ability to give newcomers, as well as their children a route to citizenship. Maintaining a robust and sustainable agricultural workforce requires a just and equitable immigration system.



## DRIVER LICENSES FOR ALL

The Wisconsin Farmers Union stands in strong support of the "Drivers License for All" campaign led by Voces de la Frontera.<sup>7</sup> Since 2007 in the State of Wisconsin undocumented immigrants cannot renew or obtain a driver license or state ID.<sup>8</sup> The coalition was founded to restore state drivers licenses and IDs for immigrants in Wisconsin and nationally.

Ensuring access to driver's licenses for all individuals, regardless of immigration status, is essential for fostering inclusive communities and supporting Wisconsin's agricultural economy. Many farmers and workers depend on reliable transportation to sustain their livelihoods, and this initiative will enhance public safety while strengthening rural and urban economies alike.

The Wisconsin Farmers Union is proud to back this effort to promote fairness and dignity for all.

**A generation ago my parents were the immigrants and started our farm. For the past couple decades our farm has relied on immigrants to continue what they started. Even if Americans started having huge families tomorrow there are simply not enough people to run our farms without immigrants.**

-- Hans Breitenmoser, Jr.  
WFO Member  
Merrill, WI

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/farm-economy/farm-labor>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wpr.org/news/immigrants-economic-tax-contributions-wisconsin>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.fwd.us/news/rural-decline/> <sup>4</sup> <https://www.wisconsincheese.com/media/facts-stats/farm-dairy-statistics>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nmpf.org/issues/labor-rural-policy/labor-and-immigration-reform-efforts>

<sup>6</sup> <https://wisconsinwatch.org/2025/01/wisconsin-undocumented-immigrant-workers-agriculture-farm/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://vdlf.org/driver-licenses-for-all/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2005/related/acts/126>