

Highlands Today: Highlands Grower Testifies Before Congress

By Gary Pinnell of Highlands Today

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WASHINGTON - Mason Smoak, a citrus producer and cattle rancher from Lake Placid, testified before Congress on Thursday about the labor needs of the American agriculture industry.

The House Agriculture Committee convened a hearing, requested by U.S. Rep. Tim Mahoney, D-Palm Beach Gardens, to examine the issues of worker verification, hiring and retaining agriculture laborers, and the implications of current federal regulations.

Rick Roth, a specialty crops producer, packer and owner of Roth Farms Inc., in Belle Glade, also testified about Florida agriculture. The Florida citrus industry generates \$9 billion a year.

"In Florida we produce almost 80 percent of all orange juice consumed in the United States," Smoak said, whose grandfather started the family business in 1933 with a fourth-grade education and 10 acres. It's grown to 3,100 acres of citrus and 13,000 acres of cattleland and wildlife conservation areas.

If Florida's citrus production shifts to Central and South America, Smoak pointed out, food security could be compromised.

The minimum wage rate in Florida is \$6.67 an hour, which is higher than the federal wage rate of \$5.85. A worker harvesting citrus averages \$10 an hour, Smoak contended. "I'm proud of the salaries we pay our employees."

The industry is interested in mechanization, Smoak said. "It sure is a lot easier to manage a few harvesting machines than a large workforce. As growers, we have actively worked through our trade associations such as Florida Citrus Mutual to lobby our state and federal representatives for research funds to study mechanical harvesting and abscission chemicals to make the process easier. However, these machines are multi-million dollar pieces of equipment that are not financially feasible for medium and small growers to use at this time."

Also, machines are not technologically ready to harvest fruit without causing long term tree and fruit damage, Smoak said. When they are ready, a crew of workers will still be needed to pick up what fruit is left on the tree and the ground.

That leaves today's growers with two options, Smoak said.

"We either have to try to find legal domestic workers through traditional methods, or use the costly and cumbersome H-2A Agricultural guest-worker program," Smoak said. "Please, believe me when I tell you that we want legal workers. The last thing that a grower wants keeping him awake at night is wondering about the legal status of his workforce. I'll reiterate: We want legal workers."

The agriculture industry is disappointed that comprehensive immigration reform failed to pass this year, Smoak said.

"It is critical, that as we debate what Washington needs to do to help American families prosper, we hear from the American farmer, rancher, and grower," said Mahoney, who represents Highlands County. "We need policies that get tough on immigration by securing our borders, finding out who is here illegally and making them pay their fair share, and

punishing those who knowingly hire cheap illegal labor. We need to develop solutions that work for our farmers instead of turning a blind eye on a broken system and forcing them to have to choose between feeding their families and breaking the law."

"There are thousands of citrus growers in Florida, just like Mason Smoak, whose family businesses are in jeopardy because they cannot find the legal labor they need. The current system is broken from top to bottom and we need to fix it. Our industry wants legal workers," said Michael W. Sparks, executive vice president and CEO of Florida Citrus Mutual, the state largest citrus trade organization with 8,000 grower members.

Greening - a tree disease - is the worst problem citrus growers face, said Andrew Meadows, director of communications Florida Citrus Mutual, an industry advocate. "It depends on what day you ask... Immigration/labor is a close second."