

AgriTalk

November 24, 2014

Mike Adams with Kristi Boswell, Director of Congressional Relations for the American Farm Bureau Federation.

Note: This is an unofficial transcript of an *AgriTalk* discussion.



Keith Good
FarmPolicy.com, Inc.
Champaign, IL
www.FarmPolicy.com

Mr. Adams: Welcome back. Well, as he said he would, President Obama last week announced his plans to move ahead by executive order on the immigration issue, and as expected, some really sharp pushback from Republican leaders in Congress as they get set to take over the Senate in the new year, and a lot of questions now around whether or not the two sides can work out anything and get meaningful legislation passed or not.

Right now, though, we look at how does all this impact agriculture. Here to talk about that is Kristi Boswell, Director of Congressional Relations for the American Farm Bureau Federation. Kristi, thank you for joining us. What is your take on the President's announcement last week as far as how it impacts ag labor?

Ms. Boswell: The President's announcement was expected. We've been working and looking through this since June, when he announced his plans to take action. And from Farm Bureau's perspective, what he announced last week, and frankly, just any executive action, can't go far enough for our agriculture needs. And that's why we focus and have continued to focus throughout this time on convincing Congress to take steps to pass responsible, long-term immigration reform.

Mr. Adams: Yeah, I think that's the takeaway here. Legislation is still needed to address this. But the question now is does the President's action last week make it harder to get that legislation passed?

Ms. Boswell: The politics of this are definitely tricky. And one thing, when we met with the White House this summer during kind of the formulation of the executive action and any administrative action, was to keep that in mind, that don't do anything that makes the politics harder. Also don't do anything that makes it more difficult on the ground for farmers. It's a very unstable situation in our

labor needs right now, and we want to make sure there's nothing that makes it worse.

You've seen the Republican response, and I would like to make a distinction between response about executive action and the way the President went about it and the reaction about the substance. And we're hoping that Congress responds focusing on the substance of this. This is an opportunity for Republicans, next Congress, to address these issues in a responsible manner, in a piece by piece manner, if that's what they need to do, and not let the politics of this hijack it, because at the end of the day, this is real for our farmers on the ground, and there needs to be action taken to fix our broken immigration system.

Mr. Adams: Well, it's hard to imagine they're going to get it done quickly. I mean, this is pretty contentious and it hasn't been solved for a number of years, so they've got their work cut out for them. But just based on the executive order of the President's, just dealing with that impact on immigration now, putting that in place, does that help, hurt or make any impact at all on the ag labor situation?

Ms. Boswell: There's definitely some tangential benefit. First and foremost, the President's action heightens enforcement. It heightens border security efforts. It focuses deportation resources on high-level criminals, felons, rather than, as the President said, families and those who are contributing to our economy or working in our fields. And so that's a big step. And so then it needs to happen, I think. Everyone agrees that border security efforts are key—in any reform.

From the deferred action side of this, the work authorization that the President is granting, because of the nature of our workforce, 50 to 70% of which is unauthorized, it's likely that there will be farm workers that benefit from this. We are not sure, at this time, how many. We're not sure how many will even take the opportunity for a temporary status. There's some risk involved there knowing it is only temporary, and it also will have, probably, some legal pushback, and will also have clearly political pushback, and may even be de-funded or reversed, so I think there's a lot of questions about where any unauthorized ag worker may fall, whether they want to actually take advantage of this.

And from Farm Bureau's perspective, we're also still ironing out the details of what employers have to do here, and what any employer liability may be, or steps that they need to take in making sure that our farmers are protected, knowing that our farms are doing everything they can currently to make sure their workers are in valid status, and filling out I9 forms. And so there's a lot of questions still up in the air.

But tangentially there will be some benefit. There definitely will be farm workers that qualify. But again, it's only short-term, and we have to have that long-term solution, and that has to come from Congress.

Mr. Adams: Yeah, still a lot of uncertainty there. It's Kristi Boswell, Director of Congressional Relations for the American Farm Bureau Federation. Kristi,

another question that is still with us—what will the approach be, piece by piece or try to do it all, you know, all-encompassing bill? How do you think that will play out in this new Congress?

Ms. Boswell: You know, as the days dwindle down in 2014, we've lost a lot of progress that we made with the Senate bill, and the Senate passing of S744, so now we transition into a Republican controlled Congress. We are educating and getting in touch with new freshmen members that are coming in, making sure they understand agriculture's labor needs, and how they fit in with immigration reform.

I do suspect, knowing where the Republican conference has been this past Congress, that they'll approach this in a more piece-by-piece fashion. I do think that there's a strong possibility that they do act. I think leaders in the party in both chambers recognize the importance of this issue and want to find substantive solutions. But I would look for a more piece-by-piece approach. And we are going to make sure that that piece-by-piece approach includes a solution for agriculture.

Mr. Adams: I suppose the looming presidential election in 2016 plays a part in this, too, because certainly both sides appealing to a large voter block there, and want to [know] how this plays out could impact that.

Ms. Boswell: Absolutely. We are already in presidential politics. It's two years away, but it's definitely on the forefront of everyone's minds in D.C., and it's going to impact it. The Latino vote is the fastest-growing population of voters, and they're going to be a key demographic to anyone winning the White House. So that's why, frankly, in my opinion, that's part of why I think it behooves Republicans to work on this issue substantively. And I think you see leaders in the party saying that and focusing more on that substance and the issue and not the politics of the executive action.

While everyone disputes or, on the Republican side, disagrees with the executive action as a process, I think everyone recognizes the issue does need to be resolved, it's just a matter of how we get there and how you get the votes to get there. I think that will be interesting as well, to see how Democrats play their cards, and whether the presidential action will be sufficient to get through 2016, or whether they'll want to have long-term solutions in place as well, which is better for everyone, but may impact the politics.

Mr. Adams: And getting back to the President's action and the questions there, how many will actually come forth? How will that structure be as far as getting people signed up on this, or how many will actually participate? What will be the enforcement of it? I mean, it seems like there are a lot of loose ends here.

Ms. Boswell: Yeah, the Department of Homeland Security has their hands full right now, and they have time to implement it. They have about 180 days to get everything in place structurally. They do have some experience with the deferred

action for childhood arrivals that took place a couple years ago, so there is some mechanisms already in place, and that should hopefully streamline some of the bureaucratic process that has to undergo here.

But there's a lot of moving pieces. And DHS, like I said, has their hands full. But we are going to be working with them and making sure the things I mentioned before, whether it be the employer side of it or farm worker side of it, make sure that they take all that into consideration.

Mr. Adams: All that takes time, and a lot of that process moves slowly. Meanwhile, agriculture, especially in some of these crops, very time sensitive, small windows. Those two schedules usually don't line up right.

Ms. Boswell: Yeah, it's still very humbling any time I go out and talk to farmers, and the politics of this are so challenging. And you look at their faces and they don't care about the politics. They don't care. They want a labor force. They need access to a legal labor force. They want that stability. And that's something that I try to continually convey to members of Congress, and stop letting politics highjack this. It's real. It's real life, and people are losing their fruits and vegetables in the field because of labor, and that's not right.

Mr. Adams: I don't know, I can't get a feel on whether or not we're closer or farther away from resolution to this. What do you think?

Ms. Boswell: It depends day by day. You know, I think it is great that the President continues to keep this at the forefront of his agenda, and I think both sides of the aisle in Congress have this issue as an important one. And hopefully the substance will prevail, and politics will set aside for the better of the country, the better of agricultural workers, the better of tech workers. I think there's a lot of segments of the economy that are touched by this. And hopefully, again, the substance prevails and Congress will respond in a true manner that provides solutions and not just talking points.

Mr. Adams: Hopefully. We've not seen that in recent times, but we'll be hopeful that the new year will bring new results. All right, Kristi, thank you very much. Have a good Thanksgiving.

Ms. Boswell: Thank you. You too.

Mr. Adams: All right. That's Kristi Boswell, Director of Congressional Relations for the American Farm Bureau Federation.

[End of recording.]