

Bloomberg School of Public Health

Department of Environmental Health Sciences
615 N. Wolfe Street / Room W7010
Baltimore MD 21205-2179
410-502-7578 / Fax 410-502-7579
clf@jhsph.edu
www.jhsph.edu/clf

Center for a Livable Future

March 6, 2014

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President,

The Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future is an academic research and education center based at the Bloomberg School of Public Health that investigates the interconnections between food systems, public health, and the environment.

Reform of the United States immigration system is long overdue and it is commendable that it is high on your agenda. Immigration reform has a direct impact on the production and processing of our nation's food supply. It has been estimated by the group Farmworker Justice that there are 4.5 million farm workers and family members in the United States with up to 75% of them being undocumented. Thousands more are employed in the slaughter plants and processing facilities that are part of our agricultural production system.

Beginning in November of 1960 with the release of the CBS Reports program *Harvest of Shame*, the plight of migratory workers laboring to harvest U.S. produce was brought to the attention of the general public. Since that time, many more newspaper and magazine articles, documentaries, and news programs have continued to show the conditions under which migratory and undocumented workers toil and live, including working hazards like exposure to pesticides, unsafe procedures in processing facilities, lack of access to health care, inadequate housing, and poverty.

The focus on the deplorable conditions faced by workers in harvesting produce and processing meat is important. There is, however, another aspect to the public health threat faced by the migrant and immigrant work force in the current U.S. food production and processing system. The threat is at the very core of the industrial food animal and vegetable production system.

Workers in industrial food animal operations face a number of threats to their health that can lead to broader public health concerns. When manure decomposes, there are at least 160 different gases released, foremost among them hydrogen sulfide, ammonia, carbon dioxide, methane, and carbon monoxide. Even short term exposure to these gases can cause respiratory problems in these workers.

In addition to the gases common in industrial food animal operations, particulate matter that can add to the temporary and chronic respiratory irritation similar to the problems faced by grain handlers: acute and chronic bronchitis, non-allergic asthma-like syndrome, mucous membrane, and noninfectious sinusitis. Evidence also suggests that increasing exposure to irritants common in industrial food animal production can lead to increased airway sensitivity.

Industrial food animal system workers face other threats to their health by exposure to antibiotic resistant bacteria, arsenic and novel flu viruses, depending on the species produced. FDA data show that approximately 80% of the antibiotics sold in the United States are used in food animal operations. The misuse of antibiotics at non-therapeutic levels common in industrial food animal operations is a significant generator of antibiotic resistant bacteria, including resistant E. coli, Campylobacter, Salmonella, and Staphylococcus Aureus, and workers in these operations are at ground zero with little or no access to health care.

In its final report, *Putting Meat on the Table: Industrial Farm Animal Production in America*, the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production stated, "...the continuing recycling of viruses and other animal pathogens in large herds or flocks increases opportunities for the generation of novel flu viruses through mutation or recombinant events that could result in more efficient human-to-human transmission. Such novel viruses not only put the workers and animals at risk of infection but also may increase the risk of disease transmission to the communities where the workers live." The potential for generating novel flu viruses increases when swine and broiler chicken operations are co-located, which is a growing trend in North Carolina.

Without immigrant and migratory workers, the industrial produce and animal production and processing system in the U.S. would collapse. Industrial animal and produce groups and USDA Secretary Vilsack recognize that fact.

At the annual Agriculture Outlook conference sponsored by USDA, Secretary Vilsack said in 2013, "Agriculture relies to a great extent on immigrant labor, and everybody in this room understands and appreciates that a good deal of that labor isn't necessarily in this country legally. And that has been the case for a long time.

"This is a risk to agriculture, and we are beginning to see the implications of that risk because we've had crops that were grown last year that could not be harvested, because there simply weren't enough hands to pick them."

This year, National Chicken Council President Mike Brown, as quoted in a release issued by the coalition, said, “To date much of the discussion has focused on the need to retain highly skilled workers such as scientists and engineers, and the need for additional temporary agricultural workers. These are important objectives, but they do not meet the needs of our industry sector. We are manufacturers, wanting a stable and permanent workforce that can help sustain the rural communities where we do business.”

It is interesting to note that this group that purports to represent chicken producers self identifies as a “manufacturer”. In truth, the NCC represents chicken processors with no regard for farmer/producers.

There is broad agreement that immigrant and migratory workers are important to the food and production system in the United States. It is time that their critical role be acknowledged by considering immigration reform in the context of the public health threat these workers face, either through pesticide and toxic animal waste exposure in produce production, the dangerous condition created by the industrial food animal production system, or the inherent dangers in the food animal processing system.

Production practices such as the routine misuse of antibiotics, a production system that promotes the generation of novel flu viruses, and the toxic nature of industrial food animal system waste should be part of the debate on immigration policy. At the very least, the involvement of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) should be a priority in determining the health impacts on these workers, as well as the possible impact on broader public health.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert S. Lawrence". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial 'R'.

Robert S. Lawrence, Director