

By Tom Vilsack

Agriculture Secretary

Most Americans don't recognize it, but farmers and the food they put on our tables play an important role in the high quality of life we enjoy.

Because our food is very affordable compared to most other countries, American families can spend more of their income on a home, their retirement, a vacation, or college education for their children.

Many people are surprised to learn that immigrant labor plays an important role in making this possible. Every time you take a bite of American food, somebody picked it, processed it, shipped it, stored it, trucked it and shelved it. Many of these folks are immigrants.

But today, our broken immigration system threatens these benefits.

Traveling the country, I have met farmers and ranchers who are concerned they won't have enough help for their next harvest – or are having trouble documenting that all their workers are here legally. The truth is that even when farmers make their best efforts to recruit only workers who are here legally, too few citizens express interest, and even fewer show up to spend long hours laboring in the hot sun.

It is simply not feasible to deport everyone who is here illegally. And over the last two years, President Obama has dedicated unprecedented resources to secure our borders and begin to put our broken immigration system right. But this smarter enforcement must be combined with smart immigration reform to help make America more competitive in the global economy and honor our national values.

Farmers need a legal way to hire the workers they rely on. If American agriculture lost access to adequate farm labor, it could cost the industry as much as \$9 billion each year. And farm workers who pay their taxes, pay a fine, and learn English ought to have a path to earning legal status.

The president has asked all of us to help elevate the debate, so that we can responsibly move forward to end illegal immigration and provide a stable workforce to farmers, ranchers, and small business owners throughout the country. One way you can do it is by visiting www.whitehouse.gov/immigrationaction.

Today, our broken immigration system offers little hope for producers trying to do right and make a living. As we move forward on this important debate about how best to fix America's broken immigration system, we need to keep in mind America's working farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers and the food they reliably put on our kitchen tables.