

February 27, 2002

Senator Tom Harkin
Chair
Senate Committee on Agriculture,

SR-328A
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Richard Lugar
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on
Agriculture, Nutrition,
and Forestry
SR-328A
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Harkin and Lugar:

We write to commend you for your hard work on the farm bill, and in particular to express our strong appreciation for your work to restore reasonable access to food stamps for permanent legal immigrants. Now, as you enter into conference with the House, we strongly urge you to include legal immigrant food stamp eligibility restorations in the final version of the bill. Currently, most legal immigrants are barred from the food stamp program, including children, refugees, the elderly, people with disabilities, and individuals who have lived in the United States for many years, worked hard and paid taxes.

The adverse impact of these restrictions has been significant. Research shows that low-income families with legal immigrants who are no longer eligible for food stamps struggle to put enough food on the table. The impact is not limited to immigrants. The restrictions have a spill-over effect on many eligible citizen children living with immigrant parents or caretakers. This is reflected by the large decline in food stamp participation among such children. At least in part, this is due to complicated food stamp eligibility rules for immigrants which are both inconsistent and more harsh than rules in other assistance programs. The result is that many families, social workers, and state agency employees are confused about food stamp eligibility for immigrants.

Food stamp eligibility restrictions for legal immigrants have also shifted costs to the states. In order to meet the nutrition needs of low-income legal immigrants, seventeen states now use their own funds to provide funding for food stamps to some or all of those made categorically ineligible by current law.

It is clear from both the Committee and floor votes that there is overwhelming

bipartisan support in the Senate for inclusion of immigrant improvements in the farm bill. President Bush also recognizes the need for significant improvements in legal immigrant access to food stamps. Specifically, the Administration's fiscal year 2003 budget would restore food stamp eligibility to low-income immigrants who have lived in the U.S. legally for more than five years. The Senate included this provision in the final version of its bill, passing the Durbin-Lugar amendment 96-1.

In contrast, the House-passed version of the farm bill does not include any provisions to improve legal immigrant access to food stamps. We urge you to remain strong in your negotiations with the House, retaining as many legal immigrant benefit restorations as possible. We also urge you to insist that the immigrant restorations in the final bill are done in a manner that would not impose additional complexity for states and ensure that they are not burdened with a set of new immigration-related determinations.

Thank you again for your leadership on this and all of the other issues addressed by the farm bill.

Sincerely,