After the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction failed to agree upon a framework for the 2012 Farm Bill, farmers, corporations, laborers and consumers alike are anxiously waiting to see how the bill will impact their businesses and their lives. The Farm Bill allocates hundreds of billions of dollars to govern multiple aspects of the agriculture industry and is up for renewal on September 30. The final details of the bill are still uncertain, as is the impact the bill will have on one of the most pressing social justice issues facing the nation: farmworker rights.

Although historically the Farm Bill has had little direct impact on agricultural labor, farmworker advocacy groups have made some progress in the past. “Some of the past successes included language authorizing research on the impact of pesticides on farmworkers and the appointment of a farmworker coordinator/leader” said the Director of Policy and Legislation at Farmworker Justice. Such progress could lay the groundwork for additional reforms in the bill. Several groups are currently advocating for more legislation promoting social justice.

Congress may be unwilling to heed these requests. A source from the House Committee on Agriculture said that legislation concerning farm labor falls under the jurisdiction of the Education and Workforce Committee.

“Of course, another challenge,” said Carolyn Berndt, Principal Associate for Federal Relations at the National League of Cities, “is that they are looking to cut programs given the budget deficit.”

What is the farmworker justice movement?

Marichel Mejia, a veteran volunteer with Student Action with Farmworkers, characterizes the farmworker justice movement as a struggle for improved working conditions. Farmworkers are seeking everything from access to potable water and clean bathrooms during the workday to improved medical plans. Mejia notes that “…a lot of things exist in other industries that farmworkers are exempt from. So they’re basically trying to get the minimum things that every other industry has.”

One major difference between the agricultural industry and other industries is the safety standards. The EPA’s Worker Protection Standard of the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act sets safety standards for the agricultural industry that require workers have access to personal protective equipment, pesticide safety training and transportation to a medical care facility in the event of an exposure. However, public interest law firm Earthjustice and like-minded groups argue that the EPA’s standards are not strict enough and are calling for farmworkers to be protected by the same standards that other industrial workers receive under the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, jobs in the agricultural industry are extremely high risk. The CDC website lists occupational hazards such as mechanical injuries, work-related lung diseases, noise-induced hearing loss, skin diseases,
and certain cancers associated with chemical use and prolonged sun exposure. The website also points out that “families of farm workers, who often share the work and live on the premises, are also at risk for injuries, illness, and death.”

As a Hispanic and Migrant Outreach Worker at the Eastern Shore Rural Health System, John Weeks helps farmworkers access health care to accommodate many of these work-related injuries and illnesses. A federally qualified community health center organization on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, the ESRH provides health care to farmworkers on a sliding scale cost and does inquire about patients’ documentation status. Weeks cites socioeconomic status as a major obstacle for farmworkers seeking medical care, “even a $20 co-pay, which doesn’t seem like much, can be difficult when you’re making $7.25 an hour.” The best way to improve conditions for farmworkers? According to Weeks, “better access to care.” He predicts that “as long as people have the feeling that they are not welcome in a place be it for legal reasons, be it for language based reasons, be it just cultural differences they are less likely to seek care and stand up for themselves.”

The main obstacle to achieving these basic labor rights for farmworkers?

According to Mejia, their employers: “The growers have too much power... If they’re making a handsome profit, what incentive do they have to share this profit with the workers or give them a medical plan if they don’t have to?”

The Director for Policy and Legislation at Farmworker Justice expressed similar frustration in an email: “…while the USDA is cutting back due to the recession and budget problems, there are still billions of dollars going to agricultural employers in the form of subsidies, research, marketing, technical assistance and many other programs, with almost nothing that directly benefits farmworkers or moves agricultural labor relations into the modern world.”

Will the Farm Bill improve conditions for farmworkers?

The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy announced a Charter for a Healthy Farm Bill urging the federal government to pass a Farm Bill which, among other things, “supports fair conditions for individual farmers, workers and eaters within the food system” and “fair wages” to “create more just communities.”

Several other groups are taking similar action. The Seattle City Council created a set of principles that they feel should be included in the bill, one of which is to “develop policies, programs, and strategies that support social justice, worker’s rights, equal opportunity, and promote community self-reliance.” In order to implement these policies the SCC suggests that the bill should “provide transparent, fair and equitable access, planning and reporting processes to immigrant, non-English speaking, poor and socially disadvantaged farmers” and “develop and implement policies which protect the health of farmers, farm workers, and food system workers from chemicals and hazardous working conditions.”
The National League of Cities followed suit by passing a similar resolution. Carolyn Berndt of the NLC said that the major step in seeing these resolutions through is “…raising awareness that these issues are related and important and that they impact our economy and our communities.” Berndt is “optimistic” that these Healthy Farm Bill principles can be included, but is uncertain whether the Farm Bill will pass this year.