

Rep. Oakes offered the following resolution:

**House Resolution No. 291.**

A resolution to urge the President and Congress of the United States to take a comprehensive, sustainable, and workable approach to improving our nation's immigration system in an effort to better serve the unique needs of our local and state economies.

Whereas, Agriculture is Michigan's second leading industry, contributing approximately \$15.5 billion annually to the state's economy and is responsible for having created more than one in five Michigan jobs. Thanks to a unique combination of natural resources and climate, Michigan is blessed with the second-most diverse agriculture industry in the United States, which produces over 300 different agricultural commodities, including traditional field crops, livestock, and fresh fruits and vegetables; and

Whereas, The diversity of Michigan agriculture is not easy to maintain. It comes at a cost and poses challenges as unique and unpredictable as our weather. Attempts to mechanize our state's agriculture industry have not replaced the need for hand labor. Machinery and technology only work with certain commodities. Asparagus, apples, berries, and other fruits and vegetables are high-maintenance, labor-intensive commodities, destined for fresh-market sale at farmers' markets and grocery store produce departments; and

Whereas, Thousands of Michigan farmers rely on highly skilled seasonal workers to handpick those fruits and vegetables to preserve its quality and integrity, making these workers an invaluable resource and treasured asset to our state. Without these seasonal workers, many of our farmers cannot get their produce to market; and

Whereas, The agriculture workforce is increasingly threatened by national immigration policy that fails to meet the needs of Michigan's agricultural industry. The United States Department of Labor's H-2A visa program is currently the only means by which farmers can hire foreign seasonal workers and is intended to help the agriculture industry meet the demand for legal seasonal workers. However, eligible farms have found the H-2A visa program to be complicated, expensive, and unresponsive to their annual time-sensitive needs. For instance, it is currently estimated that less than 250 of Michigan's seasonal workers are hired through the H-2A visa program; and

Whereas, Agriculture operates under unpredictable conditions, farmers are at Mother Nature's mercy and do their best to predict her random, ever-changing plans here in Michigan. This is particularly true for fruits and vegetables because ideal harvest opportunities can't be identified ahead of time. That's why the average three-week timeline involved in hiring workers through H-2A process makes it practically impossible to utilize; and

Whereas, In the 2012 growing season Mother Nature dealt most of our orchards and vineyards a devastating one-two punch, laying waste to some of our most treasured commodities, including, cherries, juice grapes, apples, peaches, and most other tree fruit. With few if any crops to tend, tens of thousands of seasonal workers who normally spend much of their year here in Michigan were forced to seek greener pastures elsewhere; and

Whereas, The 2013 growing season was back to normal, with trees, vines and bushes laden with ripe fruit. However, we didn't have the seasonal workforce required to harvest these precious commodities. Last spring, many of our asparagus growers had no choice but to forego several potential pickings, mowing down entire fields of perfectly ripened stalks because they didn't have the workforce to handpick them. Some growers in southeastern Michigan reported 30 percent fewer field workers on hand than usual, meaning less locally raised produce for consumers in the most densely populated corner of our state; and

Whereas, There are profound long-term implications for Michigan's agriculture industry if immigration reform continues to be neglected, leaving the availability of qualified seasonal workers in jeopardy. Without predictable access to the needed workforce, farmers may transition to less labor-intensive commodities; and

Whereas, Agriculture workforce shortages and higher wage levels make producing labor-intensive commodities, including many fruits and vegetables, less appealing to farmers. Labor shortages threaten the stability of our state and nation's locally sourced food and produce supply; and

Whereas, While the west coast of Michigan's Lower Peninsula is ideally and uniquely suited to grow fruit and vegetables, we could reasonably see these orchards and vineyards convert to corn and soybean production due to labor shortages. This would be a sad day for our beloved state. Our agricultural diversity is one of the things that makes Michigan a truly unique and special state; and

Whereas, Broadening and streamlining opportunities for farmers to hire skilled seasonal workers and provide them means for earning American citizenship would boost Michigan's economy by hundreds of millions of dollars, increasing our municipal tax revenue, and create thousands of new good paying jobs in the process. For instance, the average farm wage is approximately \$12.20 an hour, almost \$5 above the current minimum wage in Michigan; and

Whereas, Comprehensive immigration reform is crucial in Michigan's effort to maintain the prosperity of our state's second-largest industry. An industry that brings unique qualities and resources to make Michigan a wonderful place to call home; now, therefore, be it

Resolved by the House of Representatives, That we urge the President and Congress of the United States to take a comprehensive, sustainable, and workable approach to improving our nation's immigration system in an effort to better serve the unique needs of our state economies; and be it further

Resolved, That copies of this resolution be transmitted to the President of the United States, President of the United States Senate, the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, and the members of the Michigan congressional delegation