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Some Positive News in the Time of COVID

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From the onset of the COVID crisis, the Hardwood Federation's advocacy efforts have focused on policy actions connected to pandemic-related economic relief for small and medium sized businesses, the heart and soul of our sector.

Securing 'essential business' designations for the hardwood industry was a priority. Then we pivoted to working on specific programs - the Paycheck Protection Program and Economic Injury Disaster Loans - to assist hardwood businesses through economic headwinds. While those efforts are ongoing, and continue to be a priority, action is happening on other forestry-related policy priorities, specifically: non-immigrant forestry guest workers.

The Issue

In June, President Trump issued Presidential Proclamation 10014 banning non-immigrant H-2B guest workers from entering the United States. The ban included forestry workers essential to the operation of the forest sector supply chain, which the Department of Homeland Security, at the onset of the pandemic, designated as a "Critical Infrastructure."

The Reality

The forest products value chain relies heavily on H-2B guest workers to fill demanding positions - like tree planting labor needs - which domestic workers are reluctant to accept because the work is often conducted in extreme weather and terrain, and necessitates that workers move from region to region. (Less than 2 percent of the tree planting labor needs are filled by U.S. workers.)

A survey of those employing H-2B forestry workers highlighted how harmful this ban would be: unrealized economic impact to rural forest dependent communities would be in excess of \$725 million; 1.6 million acres would not be planted; 1.12 billion tree seedlings would perish.

The Good News

- Staff within the White House and key Cabinet Secretaries, like Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue, concluded that banning H-2B forestry workers would indeed cripple tree planting efforts on public and private land, and directly undercut the Administration's Trillion Tree Initiative.
- On August 12, due to their input, and pressure from key forestry champions on Capitol Hill and many of our allied forestry associations (including the Forest Resources Association, the National Alliance of Forest Owners and the American Forest and Paper Association), the Department of State updated its guidance to specifically carve out "forestry workers" from the immigration ban, benefiting the entire forest products value chain.

The Hardwood Federation will continue to monitor implementation of this guidance, as well as progress of other proposals pending in Congress. However, with lawmakers focused on COVID and the November election, meaningful movement in the short term, is not anticipated. Many of these efforts could continue into 2021, when a new Congressional session starts and new players come to town.