Comment entered into the record for NIFA Listens, Sacramento Listening Session

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Berkeley Food Institute, University of California at Berkeley

Our top priority in food and agriculture research is research on labor, including but not limited to: the impacts of immigration policy on farming communities, the growth and possibly uneven enforcement of the H2A program, housing for farmworkers, healthcare and education for farmworker families, and how shifting regulatory and industry trends have impacted farmworkers. It is undisputable that the entire agricultural economy is undergoing transformation due to a variety of factors, including political, economic, and environmental. Thus far, agricultural labor research has been largely focused on technological adaptations to labor challenges. While important, technology cannot and will not be the only solution.

We will always need humans to bring American agricultural prosperity to the world. How much will those humans be paid? According to UC Davis agricultural economist Philip L. Martin, there is little relationship between farm wages and consumer prices for fresh fruits and vegetables. So why are averages wages for a full-time agricultural worker in California at around $16,500 annually? What citizenship rights are agricultural workers entitled to after performing what is often very dangerous and difficult work? What are the conditions for workers in emerging industries like grocery delivery and meal kits? This type of research is very difficult to fund, despite its importance to the agricultural and overall economy. One in five private sector employees in the US work in the food system. Here in California, our $34 billion fruit, vegetable, and horticulture industry are particularly reliant on farm labor, disproportionate to other states and the nation as a whole. We propose that NIFA greatly increase its work on employment and work in order to protect the long-term prosperity, stability, and safety of our farms, ranches, dairies, and fisheries.