CHRISTINE O. GREGOIRE
Governor

STATE OF WASHINGTON
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
P.O. Box 40002 • Olympia, Washington 98504-0002 • (360) 753-6780 • www.governor.wa.gov

March 31, 2006

The Honorable Patty Murray
United States Senate
173 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510-4704

Dear Senator Murray:

I have been following with great interest immigration reform efforts in the Congress. I am writing to convey my strong support for comprehensive, common sense immigration reform. Washington State is acutely impacted by flaws in our current immigration and border security policies. First and foremost, we are a border state, and we are dedicated to keeping our citizens secure. We have frontline experience in preventing a terrorist from crossing the northern border and executing an attack on our home front. Our state needs a committed partner in the federal government to strengthen the security of all of our nation's borders. We need tough enforcement through fully staffed border stations, with well-trained border officials equipped with the tools necessary to protect us from those who may come to our country to do us harm.

Washington's economy lives and breathes through agriculture, an industry in which at least 60 percent of its labor force is immigrant labor. Our state needs a federal immigration policy that recognizes the importance of providing a stable, reliable workforce for our harvests. The value of our hand harvested fruit industry exceeds $1.6 billion a year. We are one of the top five states in the country in farmworker employment. And key crops, like our apples and cherries, are heavily dependent on migrant and seasonal farmworkers.

Our agriculture industry must be assured the ability to access a stable and reliable workforce for harvests. A modernized and efficient guest worker program is an appropriate tool to ensure the availability of farm labor. The need for such labor surges at incredible rates throughout the year. Consider our cherry industry, which requires fewer than 1,000 workers in March and over 26,000 in June. Or our apples, requiring fewer than 9,000 workers in May but almost 40,000 in October. Our growers need to know that there will be workers available to them as their need for labor increases so dramatically throughout the year. We cannot afford to leave crops in the field due to labor shortages caused by an antiquated immigration system.

I met with growers and farm workers last year on the issue of farm labor. I heard – loud and clear – growers' concerns over the potential shortage of laborers during harvest time. For that reason, I have supported the AgJOBS bill, which I understand is a component of the Judiciary Committee's bill. AgJOBS includes a modernized guest worker program, one that provides reliable access to labor and at the same time protects guest workers from labor abuses.

Comprehensive immigration reform must also address the 12 million undocumented immigrants currently in our country. Let me stress, I support an opportunity for earned legalization. This is not a blanket amnesty. But we need to be fair to those who have built a life here. In our state we have many families who have lived here for 10 years, even 20 years, have paid their taxes, and have paid into the Social Security system without ever being able to access those benefits. These families have contributed to our economy and have raised U.S. citizen children here. An earned legalization program would allow these families, the ones who are working, who pay the appropriate fines, and who are making efforts to participate in the American dream by learning civics and the English language, to have a chance to become legal residents in our country.

Comprehensive immigration legislation also must recognize the impact that our current policies have on children. Many high school students who have lived in this country most of their lives have no available path to citizenship. There are children turning 18 this year who were brought across the border when they were less than a year old. Raised here, speaking English, with no connection to their country of birth and fully connected to the United States, these children have no chance to legalize their status. I fully support the inclusion of the DREAM Act provisions that give this opportunity to children who plan to go to college or serve in the uniformed services.

Comprehensive reform also must address our relationship with Mexico, one of our state's most important trade partners. We must work together to combat cross-border drug trafficking and human smuggling, and strive to provide economic opportunities on both sides of the border.

Along with other Western Governors, I signed a resolution that supports a comprehensive reform proposal, similar to the one passed by the Judiciary Committee. As a border Governor and as Governor of a state dependent on the success of its agricultural industry, I offer my strong support of a comprehensive, common sense solution to the immigration issues before us. We must effectively balance our security concerns with the human demands of our economy. The Senate Judiciary Committee's bill is a very strong step in that direction and is far superior to the "enforcement only" bills that have passed the House and are being considered in the Senate. As currently written, the Senate Judiciary Committee's bill comes closest thus far to embracing the criteria described above.

Thank you for your attention to this pressing issue.

Sincerely,

Chris

Christine O. Gregoire
Governor

Originals also sent to:
Senator Maria Cantwell
Congressman Brian Baird
Congressman Norm Dicks
Congressman Richard (Doc) Hastings
Congressman Jay Inslee
Congressman Rick Larsen
Congressman Jim McDermott
Congresswoman Cathy McMorris
Congressman Dave Reichert
Congressman Adam Smith