

A number of U.S. senators have introduced bipartisan legislation to address the current shortage of agricultural inspectors at the border, according to the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee.

These inspectors protect the food supply and agricultural industries, preventing the intentional or unintentional entry of harmful plants, food, animals and goods into the U.S., it explains.

Acknowledging the need to fully staff the country's borders with these workers, U.S. Senators Gary Peters (D-MI), Ranking Member of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, Pat Roberts (R-KS), John Cornyn (R-TX) and Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) promoted the bill, called the Protecting America's Food & Agriculture Act of 2019.

The Affairs Committee says the bill would ensure the safe and secure trade of agricultural goods across national lines by authorizing U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to hire additional inspectors at the U.S.'s airports, seaports and land ports of entry.

"Every day, millions of pounds of produce, meat and other agricultural goods enter the U.S. through our nation's ports of entry," said Peters.

"This bill will help ensure we have enough inspectors to secure America's domestic food supply and agricultural industries and protect the health and safety of people in Michigan and across the country."

Senator Roberts added: "Devastating diseases and pests are just one plane or boat ride away from causing havoc for American agriculture. Thus, diligence by the Customs and Border Patrol Agriculture Specialists is vital to a safe and affordable food supply.

"This bipartisan legislation helps to ensure that our borders are properly staffed and resourced to protect U.S. agriculture, the backbone of our national economy."

On a typical day, inspectors process more than one million passengers and 78,000 truck, rail and sea containers carrying goods worth approximately US\$7.2 billion. In March, for example, agricultural inspectors and their canine teams intercepted roughly one million pounds of meat products smuggled from China, including pork products.

Not having a sufficient workforce to detect such illegal imports could have been devastating, as China is currently undergoing a dangerous outbreak of African swine fever, according to a release.

However, according to CBP estimates, there is a shortage of nearly 700 inspectors across the country.

To remedy this problem, the Protecting America's Food & Agriculture Act of 2019 authorizes the annual hiring of 240 agricultural specialists a year until the workforce shortage is filled.

It would also see the hiring of 200 agricultural technicians a year to carry out administrative and support functions.

Additionally, the bill authorizes the training and assignment of 20 new canine teams a year, which have proven valuable in detecting illicit fruits, vegetables and animal products that may have otherwise been missed in initial inspections.

Finally, the bill authorizes supplemental appropriations each year to pay for the activities of the agriculture specialists, technicians and canine teams.

The new legislation is already supported by a broad coalition of groups including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, American Farm Bureau Federation, National Treasury Employees Union, Border Trade Alliance, National Association of State Departments of Agriculture, National Pork Producers, Michigan Farm Bureau, Michigan Agri-Business Association and the Michigan Pork Producers.

Voicing the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture's (NASDA) support, CEO Dr. Barb Glenn notes: "Invasive species have been estimated to cost the U.S. economy more than \$120 billion annually, with more than half of that amount representing damage to American agriculture.

"NASDA strongly supports funding for additional staff and canine units to enhance and maintain a framework designed to protect our nation's food and agriculture through education, research, prevention, monitoring and control. We thank Senator Gary Peters and Agriculture Committee Chairman Pat Roberts for introducing this bill."