

CHILD LABOR IN THE U.S.



Montana rancher Rep. Denny Rehberg (R-Mont.), has accused the "urban" Labor Department of meddling in a "rural" industry it doesn't understand. Making the statement in a speech expounding on the rift between rural America and Washington D.C, he vowed Thursday to use his funding powers to stop the Obama administration from implementing new child-labor rules pertaining to agricultural work. Republicans, getting a boost from a small handful of Democrats who say they're opposing the regulations in the name of family farmers, have stepped up their efforts to block new rules from the Obama administration that would limit the work kids can do on farms. One of the most outspoken critics of the new child labor laws, Rep. Denny Rehberg (R-Mont.), says the proposals are an intrusion on family farms and the rural American way of life. Tester, a farmer, is in the midst of a tough re-election fight this year, asked the Labor Department in December to reevaluate the rules, saying he was worried they could hurt family operations or impact 4-H programs. The rules would prohibit kids from working in certain capacities that aren't family. The proposed rules would not eliminate the 4-H programs that teaches children agricultural skills nor would it change the long-standing that allows a child to do any kind of work on a farm owned by his or her parents. However, many Republicans and some Democrats say the provisions would hurt small family farms. In backing the Preserving America's Family Farms Act, Tester says, "Montana is a world leader in agriculture because our farmers and ranchers learn the values of responsible, safe work at an early age, I will fight any measure that threatens that heritage and our rural way of life." U.S. Senator Max Baucus (D-MT) issued the following statement: "No one has the best interest of Montana children in mind more than their own parents, and we can't have bureaucrats in Washington telling Montana families how to raise their kids. I support efforts to protect the health and safety of workers and children, but this proposed rulemaking just plain doesn't make sense." Human Right Watch and Child and Safety Advocates, on the contrary note, that the regulations for children working in agriculture haven't been updated in 40 years. The proposed rules had been caught up in red tape at the White House for the last nine months, upsetting worker safety advocates who said the rules could have prevented fatalities. Last summer a group of occupational health experts sent the White House a letter urging the administration to finish its evaluation. In a tragic accident, a week ago, two 17 year olds were critically injured in Oklahoma when they were pulled into a grain auger while on the job. The boys were flown to hospital with severe leg injuries. Highlighting last week's tragedy a group of more than 25 public-health and workplace safety experts signed a letter sent to Cass Sunstein, the OMB official who oversees rule review, urging him to move the child labor rule along. "We understand that the Labor Department's draft rule may include proposed protections that could have prevented this incident from occurring." They wrote and we hope this event and hundreds other such incidents will compel you to release this draft proposal immediately." Justin Feldman, worker health and safety advocate for watchdog group Public Citizen, feels the agricultural-related rules are behind the time. "The rules on the books now are antiquated and grossly inadequate."

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