

Commentary by Paul Wenger
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Pass AgJOBS plan to allow seasonal workers

How can we reform our immigration laws?

By Paul Wenger

Should we toughen our immigration laws and enforce them, or should we open our borders and allow unlimited immigration? To comment on this issue, please use our forum.

One thing all of us involved in agriculture understand is that we can't run our family farms and ranches without one vital resource: people. Every day, about a quarter of a million people go to work on California farms and ranches. During the peak of the harvest season, in late summer, that number doubles to about half a million.

Most of the people who fill the year-round farm jobs, and nearly all of those who take the seasonal, harvest-time jobs, were born in another country. They're a crucial link in the chain that brings the freshest, safest food and farm products from California farms and ranches to supermarkets, farmers markets and restaurants throughout the nation and around the world.

For several years, California farmers and agricultural leaders have been talking to our national representatives about the need to do something about immigration laws. Farmers rely on foreign-born workers, not just in California but in most other parts of the country. California farmers make every effort to verify that the employees they hire have entered the country legally. To qualify to be hired, many of those workers use documents that appear valid but later turn out to be false. It's not a good system for anyone, and we need to fix it.

The people who enter the United States illegally do so because there are jobs here, but few Americans want to do those jobs. At the same time, there is no reasonable and effective way for these willing workers to come to California without breaking the law. It's time to change that.

The people who come to our farms for jobs choose farm work because it's an opportunity to earn good wages and in some cases benefits such as health insurance, with the skills and abilities they have. A lot of people seem to think that farm work is unskilled work, but that's not true. A farmer from Vermont said it well in a news story earlier this month: "If you've got a sink drain that doesn't work, you don't hire a college student to fix it. You don't hire a painter. If you've got strawberries to pick, you hire a professional picker."

Farmers have been told that if we just paid high enough wages and offered more benefits, Americans would come from the cities to harvest our crops. Unfortunately, it's not so. We know because we've tried. For example, farmers worked closely with the state Employment Development Department a few years ago to hire unemployed people who needed to find jobs to keep their welfare benefits. Almost nobody showed up at the farms to work, and even fewer actually stayed. Many farm jobs last for just a few weeks, and most Americans aren't willing to take these types of seasonal jobs.

We need a system that allows people from other countries to enter the United States – legally – while farm jobs are available, and to return to their home countries once the harvest season ends.

California farmers have seen what happens when there aren't enough people to harvest their crops. During the housing boom, many people left farm jobs to work in construction, and farmers suffered through serious labor shortages. The most dramatic example came during the summer of 2006, when farmers in Lake and Mendocino counties experienced severe shortages of workers. Many farmers watched helplessly as their pears and other crops rotted on the trees.

After the housing bubble burst, a number of those workers returned to farms and the labor shortages have eased, for now. But farmers can't depend on someone else's misfortune as a solution. We need a long-term strategy.

It's important to stress that California family farmers and ranchers support enforcement and border security. But an enforcement-only approach addresses just part of the problem. We have basically built a fortified wall on the California-Mexico border, but illegal immigration continues.

A well-designed, successful temporary-worker program enhances border security. By having an effective program for identifying and credentialing workers, using a system that cannot be falsified, border agents can better enforce against drug trafficking or against individuals having malicious intent against our country.

It also benefits our national security to have a safe and stable supply of home-grown food and farm products. As a society, we want and need to maintain our food production, and a flexible immigration program helps us assure that. Foreign-born employees will continue to harvest much of our food. The real question is whether they'll do that here in the United States – under our strict guidelines and regulations – or whether they'll harvest that food in other countries, under much less scrutiny. At a time when more Americans appreciate the benefits of locally grown food, it makes sense to encourage domestic food production by assuring that the food can be picked by a legal work force.

Fortunately, we have a solution to offer. It's a bill that goes by the acronym AgJOBS, re-introduced by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., last year. The Agricultural Job Opportunities, Benefits and Security Act would reform existing temporary-worker programs for agriculture, to provide the sort of flexibility that would allow farmers in California and throughout the country to be assured that the people they hire have entered the country legally. We've worked on the AgJOBS bill for several years and have built a long list of supporters, including a large number of agricultural groups and the United Farm Workers union.

There's a lot at stake, for all of us, in doing this right. A University of California study in 2006 found that for every 100 jobs on farms and in the food industry, an additional 94 are created off the farm, in transportation, manufacturing, marketing and other types of work. Many communities in our state depend on farming as the engine of their economy.

We know that people will continue to come into our country to work. Doesn't it make sense to have a system that permits them to come in legally? We need an immigration system that recognizes the reality that farmers and their employees face every day.