

Farm Management

The Immigration Game: A major election issue confronting ag

AN issue that has dominated the recent presidential election races is immigration. Some candidates seek to overhaul immigration reform by making it more difficult for people to immigrate to the US and even deport illegal immigrants. Immigration policy has a significant affect on agriculture, particularly the more labor-intensive sectors like dairy, and fruits and vegetables. The fol-



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lowing is a discussion on how migrant labor affects US agriculture.

The National Milk Producers Fed-

eration recently released the results from a 2014 survey of 5,000 dairy farmers. A few highlights from the 1,000 responses received by the group are as follows:

- Immigrant labor accounts for about 50% of all U.S. dairy farm labor.

- Eliminating immigrant labor from these dairy farms would result in the loss of 7,000 farms, 2.1 million cows and a 90% increase in the retail price of milk.

- Eliminating dairy farm immigrant labor would deal a \$32 billion blow to the U.S. economy and cause the loss of 208,000 jobs.

The impact of these farm and job losses would fall heavily upon rural communities. Grain farmers, trucking companies, local governments, restaurants, shops and many other entities would feel the sting if dairy farm labor were eliminated. Keep in mind, this study was limited to only dairy farms. What would these figures look like if the study were expanded to all types of farms? Sadly, one state is already able to provide an answer to this question.

Georgia's story

In 2011, Georgia enacted a new immigration law that cracked down on migrant workers residing illegally in the state. Georgia achieved its desired result, as its illegal immigrant population decreased significantly. However, Georgia agriculture paid a terrible price because of the new law. The Georgia Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association estimated that crop growers lost \$140 million due to a labor shortage, and the University of Georgia projecting that farmers suffered a 40% labor shortage during harvest.

Some readers might be asking, "Why can't farmers simply use the H2A visa program to obtain legal workers?" Others might be thinking, "Why can't farmers hire American citizens?"

First, the H2A program grants a temporary visa, allowing migrant workers to

enter the U.S. to perform seasonal agricultural labor. H2A workers do not alleviate the problems of livestock operations that need a year-round supply of workers. Additionally, if you talk to agribusiness owners with H2A employees, they will tell you the process is very cumbersome and expensive.

Americans don't want the jobs

As for domestic workers, a recent Bloomberg Business article titled, "Why Americans Won't Do Dirty Jobs," addressed this issue. The piece tells the story of catfish processors and tomato pickers who lost the bulk of their laborers when Alabama's new immigration law went into effect in 2011.

In the scramble to find new workers to fill these vacancies, business owners found that U.S. citizens, even those who were unemployed, did not want jobs skinning catfish or picking tomatoes. When Alabama Gov. Robert J. Bentley signed the bill into law, he hoped that it would funnel jobs from illegal immigrants to recession-battered Americans. The only problem in Bentley's plan: Americans weren't interested in performing the types of jobs that became available.

There is no doubt that America needs a vibrant ag industry, and a vibrant ag industry needs a steady labor force. Election Day is only a year away, and as always, rural America will play a major role in deciding national and local elections. Regardless of where you sit on the political spectrum, take the opportunity to engage congressional and presidential candidates about immigration reform. It is a complex issue with no clear right or wrong answers, but those in agriculture should at least be aware of how various proposals will affect their industry.

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