

Agricultural Labor Crisis – Real or Perceived

I have been asked by many “Is there really a labor crisis?” “What really determines a pending crisis?” I respond. “Is it when the house is burning or is it when the house has been burned to the ground?” When is it bad enough that people take notice or in this case when our fellow Americans and Government are ready to take action to put out the fires and restore balance to the system?

What would happen if the U.S lost its ability to grow a safe and reliable domestic food source? What would happen if events occurred (which they would eventually) that led Americans to realize they wanted the ability to feed themselves back only to find that the opportunity would never be realized again as it once had been. Would the crisis have been in giving the opportunity away or in no longer having the opportunity?

The fact is that U.S agriculture can not exist without a foreign work force. As much as 70% of the work force supporting Agriculture is believed to lack proper work authorization. According to the Department of Labor at least half of the 1.8 million crop workers in the U.S are lacking proper documentation. With only 2% of the U.S agriculture foreign work force entering this country through the antiquated 50 year old H2A program labor intensive Ag is extremely vulnerable under recent enforcement threats.

The fact that this illegally documented workforce I speak of sustains an industry valued at \$30 billion annually according to a recent Wall Street Journal article raises a red flag itself. We have a great deal at stake and a huge responsibility in feeding the world.

Never before has this truth been more evident since 9/11 and the recent outcry for beefed up national security through increased border enforcement, enhanced check points, recent targeting of farm labor and minuteman grass root efforts.

Reports of labor shortages are cropping up everywhere and most recently in the west. Oregon media has reported portions of strawberry crops that went unharvested. Arizona’s lettuce harvest suffered an acute labor shortage during their November 2004 season and concerns are high for the upcoming season. Large tree fruit growers in California’s Central Valley are reporting that their workforce is down. Tomato growers in the Imperial Valley noted crews down by as much as 40% limiting their ability to harvest all production.

Labor contractors supplying labor for large growers in California and Arizona are struggling to find labor for the upcoming harvest. They report that not only are they concerned about a shortage due to increased enforcement but workers are opting for jobs in other areas to avoid the difficulties with enforcement. This is causing some growers to consider moving operations to neighboring countries like Mexico.

The problem is far reaching as is evident in the recent raid of a poultry plant in Arkansas which led to the deportation of 150 workers and the complication that young children were left behind. Then On July 29th a lawsuit against 4 major agricultural employers in Idaho alleging repeated employment of unauthorized workers.

Do we have a labor crisis? You bet we do.

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