

## **OUR OPINIONS: Raise farm pay to keep immigrants**

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### **Body**

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Farmers in the Southwest are discovering what for them is an uncomfortable truth: Workers go where the money is. Illegal **immigrants** who might otherwise be willing to pick fruit or harvest vegetables are in short supply this harvest season because they've found better-**paying** jobs.

With the winter vegetable season less than a month away, growers in Arizona and California are appealing for help from the U.S. government. An emergency supply of temporary visas and expedited border crossings will do nicely, according to growers.

"For some time now, a number of other industries have been luring away **farm** workers," Western Growers association President Tom Nassif said in a statement last month. "The construction industry alone is siphoning off thousands of **farm** workers every month. Couple that with increased border enforcement which targets **farm** workers, an aging **farm** work force, an inability to fill **farm** jobs with replacement workers and American workers who are unwilling and unable to do the job and you have what has rapidly become a monumental problem."

Rather than implore the U.S. government for relief, growers could resort to a tried-and-true method to enlist more help: **Pay** higher wages. That's more immediate than waiting for government help. And at some point the **pay** might even appeal to Americans now "unwilling" to work in the fields.

Of course, that would require a change in what the **farming** sector considers acceptable labor costs. The American **Farm** Bureau Federation this year endorsed part of proposed federal legislation designed to increase the supply of temporary foreign **farm** workers. But the organization, which represents agricultural producers, objected to a provision requiring them to continue to **pay** those temporary workers fairly.

Farmers who hire legal foreign workers on a short-term basis must **pay** the higher of the local prevailing wage, the minimum wage or a floor set by the U.S. Department of Labor for each state. That floor ranges from \$7.63 an hour in Arizona and New Mexico to \$9.18 in Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin.

**Farm** interests naturally argue that if they have to **pay** higher wages to workers, consumers would in turn have to **pay** more for food. Perhaps. If so, consumers would make the same discovery farmers have: There are no free lunches.

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