

Ruben Navarrette: One subject Ryan could help milk

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Body

SAN DIEGO -- Got illegal immigrants? The nation's dairy industry does, and it wouldn't last long without them.

Now that Wisconsin's Paul **Ryan** has been picked by Mitt Romney for the Republican ticket, let's pour ourselves a glass of **milk** and have a discussion that we've been none too eager to have.

We need to talk about immigration not as an emotional issue but as an economic **one**. Like other dairy states -- i.e., California, New York, Vermont -- Wisconsin depends heavily on the dairy industry. And the industry depends heavily on illegal immigrant labor. It's that simple.

The same goes for other outdoor industries such as farming, ranching and landscaping. If it's a job where you work with your hands and where you work outside, you're going to find a lot of foreign workers doing it.

You can bet that **Ryan** understands this reality, and that it's **one** reason he has long supported efforts in Congress to provide a more stable workforce for these kinds of industries. This includes the AgJobs bill, which was put together by a bipartisan group of lawmakers and would have legalized about 500,000 farm workers. **Ryan** was a co-sponsor of every version of that legislation in four consecutive Congresses.

"I believe there was a certain pragmatism at work," Craig J. Regelbrugge, co-chair of the Agriculture Coalition for Immigration Reform, told me. "There was a serious constituent issue and economic issue in his district. The dairy industry in his district produces over \$100 million annually in **milk** and dairy products. Its `the district's~ nurseries and greenhouses grow almost \$45 million in trees, shrubs, and plants."

Regelbrugge, who is also vice president of government relations for the American Nursery & Landscape Association, all but admits that these industries would falter without undocumented workers.

"Most of the labor force sustaining these industries wasn't born in America, and has papers that look better than they really are," he said. "They are pretty much the only **ones** applying for a job that gives them the privilege to have their arm well past the elbow inside Elsie the Cow at 3 a.m. when she goes into labor."

Spot on.

Americans talk a great deal about immigration, but we usually talk about it in the wrong way. We're more likely to argue over the impact of immigrants on the culture -- i.e., complain about people speaking Spanish at the supermarket or the post office -- while not admitting the positive impact of immigrants on the economy.

It's part of the conundrum that Republicans face this week in Tampa at their convention. They can't win without Hispanics. Yet they can't get Hispanics to vote for them until they learn how to talk about immigration in a way that

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isn't offensive. And they can't do that until they stop harping on how immigrants impact the culture and start talking about how immigrants -- even the illegal kind -- impact the economy.

This is where **Ryan** comes in. He could **help** unlock this debate, and he could **help** his party stay afloat. And in the process, he could **help** the rest of us come to grips with basic realities that we have been reluctant to confront.

A few years ago, I was guest hosting a radio show in San Diego when I got a call from a city slicker who must have thought that **milk** comes from cartons in the supermarket. As **one** who grew up in the farm country of Central California, I know that some of our hardest and dirtiest jobs would not get done in a world with no illegal immigrants.

For instance, I said on the radio, **milking** cows. That morning, The Wall Street Journal had run an article detailing how dependent the modern dairy industry had become on foreign workers, most of them undocumented. The caller wanted to challenge that argument. After all, he pointed out, these days, most dairies use **milking** machines.

I responded, "That's true. But, who connects the machine to the cow?"

At that point, my producer sarcastically chimed in with her own answer: "The cow does."

There you go. As far as some are concerned, there's the answer to our immigration problem: The self-**milking** cow.

Meanwhile, back in the real world, we need people like **Ryan** to step up and **help** shape an immigration debate for real people dealing with real labor shortages.

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