

Border Security, Job Market Leave Farms Short of Workers; Growers Frustrated by Delay in Agriculture Legislation

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Body

Bins of Granny Smith apples towered over two conveyor belts at P-R **Farms'** packing plant. But only one belt moved. P-R **Farms**, like **farms** up and down California and across the nation, does not have enough **workers** to process its fruit.

"We're **short** by 50 to 75 people," said Pat Ricchiuti, 59, the third-generation owner of P-R **Farms**. "For the last three weeks, we're running at 50 percent capacity. We saw this coming a couple years ago, but last year and this year has really been terrible."

Farmers of all types of specialty crops, from almonds to roses, have seen the immigrant labor supply they depend on dry up over the past year. Increased **border security** and competition from other industries are driving migrant laborers out of the fields, farmers say.

Earlier this year, many farmers were optimistic about finding a solution in the **Agricultural Job Opportunity, Benefits and Security Act**, or AgJobs. The bill, proposed by Sens. Larry E. Craig (R-Idaho) and Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), would allow undocumented **agricultural workers** already in the United States to become legal permanent residents and would streamline the current guest-**worker** program. In March and September, hundreds of **growers** traveled to the Capitol to lobby for the bill.

But deep divisions within the Republican Party have stalled immigration reform. Although **legislation** to build a 700-mile fence along the **border** passed the House and Senate, the AgJobs proposal has languished.

As the **border** tightens, Mexican **workers** who once spent part of each year in American fields without a work permit fear that if they go back to Mexico, they will be trapped behind the **border**, farmers say. Instead, they stay in the United States, taking year-round **jobs** that pay more and are less backbreaking than **farm** work, such as cleaning hotels or working in construction in cities on the Gulf Coast devastated by last year's hurricanes.

"Frequently you hear, especially from California, complaints about construction companies actually recruiting **workers** from the sides of the fields," said Craig Regelbrugge, co-chair of the **Agriculture Coalition for Immigration Reform**. Other industries that depend on immigrant labor, such as landscaping and construction, "are also

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concerned about the overall availability of labor given demographic trends," he said, adding: "But agriculture is the warning sign, if you will, of structural changes in the economy."

The problem is now reaching crisis proportions, food growers say. As much as 30 percent of the year's pear crop was lost in Northern California, growers estimate. More than one-third of Florida's Valencia orange crop went unharvested, Regelbrugge said. In New York, apples are rotting on the trees, because workers who once picked the fruit have fled frequent raids by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, said Maureen Marshall, an apple grower in Elba.

Michael Keegan, a spokesman for the federal agency, said he could not confirm any specific targets for raids. But he said it now takes a more proactive approach to work-site enforcement, seeking to build criminal cases against employers instead of issuing fines. The agency focuses work-site raids on "critical infrastructure," he said, such as airports and chemical plants, including food processing facilities.

Critics say increased wages would keep workers in the fields. Growers contend that their wages, often minimum wage plus a piece rate, are as high as they can pay and still remain profitable. Ricchiuti echoed many growers when he said local people "don't want to do the work at any price."

Farmers also contend that an existing guest-worker program is not usable. Although some industries, such as Maryland crab pickers, rely on the H-2B program to provide foreign labor, farmers argue that the equivalent program for agriculture, known as H-2A, is too complex and has onerous requirements, such as providing housing for workers. Nationwide, only 2 percent of agricultural workers use H-2A visas, Regelbrugge said.

"We explored [H-2A], and it was so cumbersome, it just would not meet our needs," said Ricchiuti of P-R Farms, who grows apples, nectarines, nuts and grapes in California's fertile San Joaquin Valley. "It's so specific; you agree to hire so many people at this time. What if the season is two weeks late? I have to have work for them. Or pay them to do nothing."

Some farmers said they have invested in machines to take the place of workers, though some tasks, such as picking soft fruit, cannot be mechanized.

Others are worrying about credit. In August, Tom Brown, president and chief executive of Fresno Madera Farm Credit bank in California, testified at an immigration forum hosted by Rep. George Radanovich (R-Calif.) that he was worried about the impact of the labor shortage on farmers' ability to repay loans.

Some food growers, who as a group tend to vote Republican, now find themselves fighting hardest against leaders in their own party.

"So many of the farmers here are conservative, but they're finding themselves kind of at odds, not so much with Republicans in this area but with Republicans on the East Coast who have no idea what's going on in the San Joaquin Valley and California," said Daniel Jackson, a California fruit grower. "Something could happen in Washington, D.C., tomorrow, and all the farmers in the San Joaquin Valley would be out of work."

Ricchiuti has a framed photo of President Bush and first lady Laura Bush on his office wall and a pile of "Re-Elect Arnold" signs supporting Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R-Calif.) at his processing plant. But he grew agitated when he talked about the GOP's handling of immigration.

"What's wrong with the Republican leadership?" he demanded. "They control the House and the Senate. I would have thought it would be a slam-dunk."

"Certain Republicans are very closed-minded," he continued. "They're prejudiced, and they're concerned about people taking their jobs. Well, you know what? You won't do those jobs. You might stick your head up the grapevine once or twice, but you won't do it a third time."

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Hopes for the AgJobs bill are now on hold until after the midterm elections, said Barry Bedwell, president of the California Grape and Tree Fruit League. Bedwell has made four trips already this year to Washington to lobby for immigration reform.

"Even from our best friends and allies in the San Joaquin Valley on the Republican side, they were saying, yes, they understand. But they were trying to explain the political reality of an election year," he said. "Boy, I will be happy to get by the election, where we can start talking reason."

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