

Gretchen Sierra-Zorita: American food movement must speak out on immigration

San Jose Mercury News (California)

November 9, 2011 Wednesday

Copyright 2011 San Jose Mercury News All Rights Reserved

Section: NEWS; Opinion

Length: 678 words

Byline: By **Gretchen Sierra-Zorita** Special to the Mercury News

Body

State anti-**immigration** laws are disrupting our **food** production system, and no one in the **American food movement** is **speaking out**. Failure to join the **immigration** debate will limit the **movement's** ability to influence **immigration** laws that could transform the **American** diet.

Agriculture's dependency on illegal workers came into plain view when untold numbers walked off Alabama farms last month. They were scared off by HB 56, the state anti-**immigration** law that allows police to arrest anyone found without proof of **immigration** status during routine stops. The workers could not be replaced, and the harvest was left to rot.

HB 56 backfired because the law was based on pure politics rather than sound policy. State legislators assumed that by making the state inhospitable to illegal immigrants, they would free up jobs for the 9.8 percent currently unemployed in Alabama. They did not realize, however, that most Americans do not have the aptitude or stamina for the low-paying jobs that illegal immigrants are willing to take.

The impact of the Alabama **immigration** fiasco on its farming economy has been widely reported. Yet the usually loquacious **food** intelligentsia has remained surprisingly quiet on the subject of Alabama.

The **food movement** is a loose and sometimes contentious alliance of experts and advocates interested in improving the quality and availability of **food**. It includes well-known figures like writer Michael Pollan and first lady Michelle Obama, as well as many unknown individuals.

Over the last decade, **movement** leaders have railed against methods of industrial **food** production that foster environmental damage, labor abuses, and **food**-borne illnesses. **Food** activists have connected the dots between federal farm subsidies that keep corn and soy farmers in business, stimulate overproduction of cheap feedlot meat and processed **foods** and fuel **American** obesity. They have convinced many of us that fresh **food** tastes better, that gardening is a noble avocation and that family meals are critical to our children's happiness and success.

The one issue the **food movement** has not tackled is the use of illegal manpower to contain the already high costs of labor-intensive crops, mainly fruits, vegetables and tree nuts. Domestically, California produces nearly half of these crops, which account for about half of state's \$38 billion in agricultural revenues. These crops receive little federal support, and growers are sensitive to labor costs fluctuations which constitute 30 to 40 percent of their expenses. For most of these farmers, mechanization is not an option. Removal of undocumented workers from the seasonal workforce will increase wage rates. Given the scarcity of hard data, it is difficult to estimate how this increase will manifest itself on the grocery shelves, but it does not bode well for the calorie-rich, nutrient-poor **American** diet.

Gretchen Sierra-Zorita: American food movement must speak out on immigration

We have all been told that we are what we grow, but how we grow it is equally important. Enforcement of draconian immigration laws could dramatically change what we eat and even whether it is grown domestically. This is why immigration reform is a food issue and this is why the food movement cannot afford to ignore it.

Food activists need to get their hands in the dirt and press for immigration reforms that do not jeopardize labor intensive crops nor the availability and affordability of fresh market commodities. Refusing to grapple with the impact of immigration reforms on the cost of food production will reinforce the perception that the food movement mostly caters to affluent socio-economic elites and not to ordinary Americans. Preserving this elitist image will make the food movement's agenda increasingly irrelevant to the very people they are trying to win over and serve.

Gretchen Sierra-Zorita is project director of Media Diversity Initiatives at the National Hispanic Foundation for the Arts. She wrote this for this newspaper.

GRETCHEN SIERRA-ZORITA is project director of Media Diversity Initiatives at the National Hispanic Foundation for the Arts. She wrote this for this newspaper.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: IMMIGRATION (93%); US STATE IMMIGRATION LAW (90%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (90%); FOOD SALES & REVENUES (89%); FOREIGN LABOR (89%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (79%); US STATE GOVERNMENT (79%); FOOD SECURITY (78%); AGRICULTURAL INCOME (77%); LABOR FORCE (77%); COOKING & ENTERTAINING (73%); OBESITY (73%); WAGES & SALARIES (72%); AGRICULTURAL SUBSIDIES (72%); ARRESTS (72%); POLLUTION & ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS (50%); FOOD BORNE ILLNESS (50%); ENVIRONMENT & NATURAL RESOURCES (50%)

Industry: AGRICULTURE (89%); FOOD SALES & REVENUES (89%); FOOD INDUSTRY (78%); AGRICULTURAL INCOME (77%); FRUITS & VEGETABLES (73%); AGRICULTURAL SUBSIDIES (72%); SOYBEAN FARMING (71%)

Person: MICHELLE OBAMA (54%)

Geographic: ALABAMA, USA (94%); CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (94%)

Load-Date: November 10, 2011