

Immigrant Workers Vital, Va. Firms Say; Poultry Industry Seeks Better U.S. Screening to Cull Illegal Applicants, Avert Fines

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Body

Every morning, 26,000 white tom turkeys arrive at the Virginia Poultry Growers Cooperative plant in the Shenandoah Valley, where they are killed, gutted, cleaned, chilled, cut up and prepared for shipment by the end of the day. The work is hard and cold and messy, and few local residents are willing to do it.

So the cooperative relies heavily on immigrant workers. Its owners say that they do their best to weed out applicants who are in the country illegally but that their industry is increasingly squeezed by federal pressure on employers who hire illegal immigrants and criminal networks that sell false or stolen identity documents.

Now, poultry processors in Virginia and across the country are taking their case to Congress. Last week, several hundred industry leaders met in Washington to lobby for immigration changes and an improved document-checking system as well as relief from environmental rules that have doubled the price of the feed corn they buy for their birds.

"We depend on immigrants. If they all went away today, people like us couldn't operate," said Jim Mason, president of the cooperative, who visited a half-dozen congressional offices. "People think we hire Hispanics because we can get them cheaper, but it is absolutely false. We do everything the government asks and more to make sure our workers are legal, and we turn a lot of people away. But if an ID is stolen, there is nothing we can do."

The lobbying blitz has come as diverse businesses, including hotels and seafood processors, have begun to unite to defend their economic interests in light of the intensifying government crackdown on illegal immigration. In recent months, stepped-up enforcement has led to a raids on workplaces across the region, including a Leesburg convention resort and an Annapolis painting company.

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In Virginia, an umbrella group called Virginia Employers for Sensible Immigration Policy has recently been formed. Its members include the state Home Builders Association, Manufacturers Association, Retail Merchants Association and Chamber of Commerce. It also represents such major poultry companies as Tyson Foods and hundreds of smaller producers.

The group seeks to preserve the state's attractive business climate, support legal immigration as essential to the area economy and press the federal government to increase action against illegal immigration instead of placing the burden on local employers, who can be heavily fined if they hire illegal workers.

"Our industry employs more than 10,000 people and supports more than 1,200 family farms," said Hobey Bauhan, president of the Virginia Poultry Federation. "We are blessed with very low unemployment, and there are simply not enough Americans available to do the work. We offer a good wage, and we want to have a legal work force, but the available tools for checking document fraud are just not adequate. The entire federal immigration system is in dire need of reform."

Some regional legislators appear to be sympathetic to such concerns, especially among industries such as poultry breeding and processing that support large portions of the rural economies of Virginia and Maryland. Rep. Robert W. Goodlatte (R-Va.), a longtime member of the House Agriculture Committee, has a busy constituent office in Harrisonburg, seven miles from Hinton, in the heart of the state's poultry region.

Goodlatte agrees with Bauhan that the federal online documenting system needs to be changed to detect more immigrants who use stolen papers and place less blame on employers who fail to catch them.

The broader solution, he said, is not to legalize immigrants already working in the United States, as some have proposed, but to expand the national "guest worker" program, which allows up to 66,000 unskilled foreigners to work temporarily on farms and other seasonal job sites, so that it would include food processing and other agribusiness jobs.

"I am very much opposed to bills that would grant amnesty to illegal immigrants, and I also want to make sure we don't undercut jobs and wages for those U.S. citizens who do want the work," Goodlatte said. "We need the existing temporary worker program to keep up with the changing face of agribusiness. We need to enforce immigration laws and make them work better where there is a shortage of American workers."

Efforts to expand the guest worker program failed last year in the broader collapse of a Senate compromise proposal for comprehensive immigration change. Opponents of the program say participants are vulnerable to such exploitation as being cheated of wages and being forced to stay in poor living quarters.

At Jim Mason's processing plant, a majority of the 560 workers are immigrants who live full time in the United States, most of whom are from Mexico or Central America. Every instructional sign, such as "Wash Your Hands," is in English and Spanish. Each department has a bilingual supervisor, and lines of people in smocks and hairnets chatter in Spanish as they hose, clean and chop turkeys on conveyor belts.

On the main door to the plant, a sign reads "This Business Employs American Citizens and Legal Residents Only." In the hiring office, staff members enter the name of applicants and details of the documents they provide. Within a minute, the computer indicates whether the documents are genuine.

Mason said he quizzes prospective workers with extra questions to check their veracity. Many forged documents come from Puerto Rico, but most immigrant applicants are from Mexico or Central America, so he asks questions to find out whether they know, for example, that the capital of Puerto Rico is San Juan.

More than he worries about immigration agents swooping down on his workforce, though, Mason fears he will not be able to afford feed for his turkeys, as the government increasingly orders U.S.-grown corn to be converted into ethanol for use in car engines.

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"We are a family business. We have no subsidies and no safety net," Mason **said**. "If we don't get the ethanol situation settled, there is no need to talk about immigration problems at all, because we will be out of business."

Graphic

IMAGE; By Pamela Constable -- The Washington Post; A **worker** hoses off turkeys at a **poultry** plant in Hinton, **Va.** Owners **say** they try to avoid hiring **illegal immigrants** but feel squeezed by federal penalties for employers and by criminal networks that sell false or stolen identity papers.

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