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The fuss over farm labor

Florida farmers and farmworker advocates worry about a chronic shortage of laborers if Congress fails to pass legislation legalizing millions of undocumented immigrants

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Now that Congress seems unlikely to approve comprehensive immigration reform, Florida farmers and farmworker supporters are voicing concerns about possible labor shortages.

In fact, several South Florida growers and farmworker advocates said last week that a farmworker shortage in the region's vital farm economy is probable -- if the federal government fails to implement a guest worker program and steps up an already heightened crackdown on unauthorized immigration along the border.

"Farmers are calling and asking 'Will we have enough workers?' " said Homestead-based Josefina Juárez, one of nine federally funded employees in Florida who monitor farmworker rights.

Lost in the increasingly shrill debate about immigration reform is whether failure to legalize millions of undocumented immigrants will disrupt farming -- a component of the American economy that relies heavily on undocumented immigrants. About 1 million of the nation's estimated 2.5 million farmworkers may be undocumented immigrants, studies show.

Farmers, farmworkers and their advocates say at least four factors are fueling fears that the number of available farm hands is diminishing:

- Congressional failure to move on a stalled U.S. Senate bill that would establish a temporary worker program and legalize about 9 million of the country's estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants -- many of them employed in agriculture.
- Stepped-up border enforcement that is making it increasingly difficult for undocumented immigrants to sneak into the United States.
- Heightened fear of random raids by immigration agents.

- Migration of many farmworkers to more lucrative construction jobs particularly in storm-ravaged New Orleans.

SHORTAGE THREAT

"We are worried about shortages now," said Leonardo Valadéz, a farmworker contractor in Homestead. Valadéz spoke as he prepared an open field for tomato planting at the corner of Southwest 264th Street and 162nd Avenue north of downtown Homestead. Tomato picking is expected to begin in November.

At a meeting in the Redland Thursday about issues facing growers, John Alger, of Alger Farms in Homestead, one of South Florida's largest growers of sweet corn and trees, told state legislators a migrant worker program was crucial to the survival of the county's \$1.09 billion agriculture industry.

"Unless we have a legal, reliable workforce, we're cooked. We're done," Alger said, drawing applause from the audience.

Experts say it's difficult to predict a widespread chronic shortage of immigrant farmworkers. Recent studies discount the possibility of an enduring shortage because the supply of unauthorized foreign workers has always been plentiful -- though experts don't rule out spot shortages in certain industries at certain times.

South Florida growers were hit by a real -- albeit temporary -- labor dearth earlier this year when false rumors of random and widespread immigration raids ripped through the migrant community, keeping thousands from work. As fears of mass deportations subsided, labor levels returned to normal, Alger said.

At sunrise Friday, the usual clusters of largely undocumented day laborers dotted the streets and avenues near downtown Homestead -- just like any other work day.

Two Guatemalan farmworkers interviewed in the area Friday said they were disappointed Congress would not pass legalization legislation, but vowed to continue working without papers.

SUPPORTING FAMILIES

"What can we do? We need to send money to our families," said Manuel, 31, one of the undocumented workers. "It would be preferable to have work permits and be legal, so we have more labor protections, but we can work without permits as well."

Francisco, 38, said he and Manuel had worked in the United States without papers for three years and could continue working the same way for several more years. They agreed to talk on the condition that only their first names be used.

Shannon McNeill of Belle Glade, one of the country's largest sweet corn labor contractors, pointed out the scare and the nationwide "Day Without Immigrants" marches May 1, when thousands stayed home from work, as evidence of how vulnerable the state's agriculture is to immigration crackdowns.

Alger, who also farms land in Palm Beach County, said he lost "many, many" acres of corn in May because his company couldn't find pickers.

"The vegetable crops are perishable. If 30 percent of your workforce doesn't show up today, you can't say I'll harvest tomorrow. It doesn't work that way," Alger said.

In other words, crops don't wait. Labor shortages mean lost income. William Kandel, a Department of Agriculture expert on farm employment, said heightened border enforcement and huge storms such as Katrina may contribute to recurrent spot shortages in the future.

"In many cases, when people complained about labor shortages they were often experiencing localized 'spot' shortages but the trends going on now like increased border enforcement and the considerable demand for labor brought about by the destruction from Katrina suggest that these kinds of spot shortages may occur more frequently," said Kandel, a sociologist at the agency's Economic Research Service.

CAN'T COMPETE

Agricultural jobs can't compete on wages with the construction industry, Alger said. "Where agriculture farm workers get paid \$10 bucks an hour to pick strawberries or whatever, a construction job is going to pay him \$16 to carry buckets of concrete," Alger said.

On Thursday, South Miami-Dade farmers signed empty grocery bags they will send to lawmakers expressing support for a guest worker program.

"Let's face it," said Katie Edwards, executive director of Dade County Farm Bureau, "we don't have willing Americans who want to take these jobs in agriculture."

This is true, she added, even though they pay more than jobs at fast food restaurants.

"If Congress approves an enforcement-only immigration bill, the effects to agriculture will be devastating," Edwards said. "Access to a workable guest worker program is vital."

Farmworkers

Florida is one of the country's key farming states, employing thousands of farmworkers, particularly crop pickers.

Farmworkers in the country: 2.5 million

Crop pickers, the rest livestock workers: 1.8 million

Crop workers in Florida: 30,000-50,000

Crop workers in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties: 10,000-15,000