

The New York Times



SYMPOSIUM: Could Farms Survive Without Illegal Labor?

If American growers depend on illegal labor, would strict enforcement of immigration laws drive up prices for fruits and vegetables?

A PRICE TAG IN THE BILLIONS

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August 17, 2011

If only it were that easy – that the only consequence of driving unauthorized farm workers out of the U.S. would be a few more pennies on the price of lettuce or an extra nickel for an avocado. In fact, the likely upshot would be far worse and would cut far deeper into our economic well-being.

Why? Immigrant workers aren't a "cheap labor" alternative, as so many Americans think. They are the only labor available to do many unskilled jobs, and if they were eliminated, most would not be replaced. Instead, whole sectors of the economy would shrivel, and with them, many other jobs often filled by more skilled Americans.

In 1960, half of all the native-born men in the U.S. labor force were high school dropouts eager to take unskilled outdoor jobs in agriculture and construction. Today, fewer than 10 percent of the native-born men in the work force lack high school diplomas. But the economy still generates plenty of unskilled jobs, and most unskilled immigrants don't displace American workers. They fill niches – not just farmhand, but also chambermaid, busboy and others – that would otherwise go empty. And they support more skilled, more desirable jobs – foremen, accountants, waiters, chefs and more – at the businesses where they work and others in the surrounding community.

Just raise the wage, you say, and an American would take the job? Not necessarily, and very unlikely if it's a farm job. Farmers have been trying that – for decades. They raise the wage. They recruit in inner cities. They offer housing and transport and countless other benefits. Still, no one shows – or stays on the job, which is outdoors and grueling and must get done, no matter how hot or cold or otherwise unpleasant the weather. And of course, at some point, there are limits to how high a wage a grower or dairy farmer can pay before he is forced out of business by a farmer who produces the same commodity in another country, where the labor actually is cheap.

That's exactly what will happen if unauthorized farm workers are expelled from the U.S. – not just more expensive produce, but the collapse of American labor-intensive agriculture. Instead of milk from a nearby dairy, the only kind available would come from abroad, and it would be irradiated or powdered. Meat would come from Brazil, shellfish from Thailand, fruits and vegetables from New Zealand – and that's the good, expensive stuff. There would be plenty of inferior products too, and much much less of anything would be fresh.

But worst of all would be the jobs lost for Americans. According to economists, every farm job supports three to four others up and downstream in the local economy: from the people who make and sell fertilizer and farm machinery to those who work in trucking, food processing, grocery stores and restaurants. Do we really want to lose those jobs too? No one in America is going to benefit from expelling immigrant farm workers. And the cost won't be pennies: it will run to billions of dollars.

The following experts also participated in this symposium:

Lisa Garcia Bedolla Center for Latino policy research

Karina Gallardo economist, Washington State University

Philip Martin labor economist

Michael J. Roberts economist, North Carolina state university

Benjamin Shute Hearty Roots community farm