

FARMERS NEED LEGAL, RELIABLE LABOR SOURCE

By Duane Gillis
December 18, 2012

I grow alfalfa, chili, corn and onions in southern New Mexico on land my family has been farming for four generations. We plant 3,000 acres and need about 120 men at harvest time. For as long as I can remember, the overwhelming majority of those men have been Mexican or Central American – few U.S. workers apply for the jobs and those who do rarely last more than a few days. We try everything we can think of – including raising our wages. But sometimes we still can't find enough workers to get the job done.

I'm not the only farmer short on workers these days – far from it. Whether you live in Oregon, Washington, California or out east in states like Alabama and Georgia; whether you grow cherries, berries, apples, pears, tomatoes, asparagus, onions or ornamental trees – you're in trouble if you tend or pick your crop mostly by hand as opposed to with machines. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, more than 50 percent of workers on U.S. farms are unauthorized immigrants, and in California, where farming brings in \$38 billion in annual revenue, the number of workers available this year was said to be 20 percent below normal.

Farmers across the country are being battered by a perfect storm. Immigration enforcement is getting tougher. It's much harder and more expensive than even just a few years ago for workers to cross the border without papers. There's more work at home in Mexico, and it's paying better. Many immigrant farm hands lured away from agriculture during the housing boom have not come back. And try as we might – and believe me, we try – most of us still can't replace our foreign workers with Americans.

There's only one solution: a workable, streamlined, legal way to hire legal foreign workers. But after more than a decade of trying, Congress hasn't been able to do its job and create a lawful program that works.

I think I'm pretty typical of farmers like me – small to medium-sized growers with labor-intensive crops. I look at my workers' papers and fill out I-9 employment forms – after all, the last thing I want is to put my operation at risk by hiring an unlawful labor force. I'll raise wages when I have to in order to attract men – although, of course, I can only raise them so much before my crops become too expensive to sell. I'd like to hire Americans, and I understand why any temporary worker program would make me try before it let me hire Mexicans or Central Americans.

But in the end, my crop won't wait. If I can't find enough willing and able U.S. workers, I need a fast, legal, reliable way to hire foreign farm hands. Of course, any program will come with some red tape – I understand that. But there are limits. The existing process for hiring agricultural guest workers – the H-2A program – is so bureaucratic and unreliable that many growers won't use it.

The good news: a lot of farmers in my situation are starting to come together and come up with ideas. Under pressure from growers, several bills were introduced in Congress this year

to streamline or replace the H-2A program – and one case, to let currently unauthorized workers go home and return on H-2A visas. Nothing passed – Democrats and Republicans couldn't agree. It's an old impasse: most Democrats oppose temporary worker programs and prefer legalizing unauthorized workers, while most Republicans favor visa programs and oppose legalization. But the truth is we need both – an answer for workers already here and a new program. And several farm groups, including the American Farm Bureau, are developing compromise proposals.

Now that the election is over, lawmakers in Washington are thinking about their agendas for next year – and a labor fix for agriculture needs to be at the top of their lists. We can't afford to wait much longer. We must put aside our partisan differences and the grandstanding we're all so sick of and start finding answers for America. We need Congress to come together around a deal that works – for American farmers, American workers and foreigners who want to work in the U.S. legally.

Duane Gillis, a farmer in Hatch, New Mexico, grows alfalfa, chili, corn and onions on land his family has been farming for four generations. He plants 3,000 acres and needs about 120 men at harvest time.