

TEXAS BUSINESS: PASS IMMIGRATION REFORM

August 28, 2006

Often, in the middle of a heated debate, people forget exactly what they're arguing about. But we employers on the front lines of American business cannot forget – we know why the nation must come to grips with illegal immigration. We know that Americans must face up to the reality of the foreign workers we need to keep the economy growing and bring them under the rule of law, for their sake and ours.

We own and run a variety of businesses: agriculture, food processing, hospitality, construction, banking and more, mostly but not exclusively in Texas. And we know, if not firsthand, certainly at close reach, just how much the economy depends on immigrant labor.

It's not that Americans don't work hard. They do. But the native-born workforce is changing rapidly. In 1960, half of all American men dropped out of high school and looked for unskilled work; today, less than 10 percent do. Baby boomers are retiring. Fertility rates are declining. Yet every year, the economy creates hundreds of thousands of new jobs that require few if any skills, and in the next decade, we will be millions of workers short.

Not all employers mean well, of course. Some companies exploit illegal immigrants. But most who turn to foreign workers do so out of necessity. We aren't looking for "cheap labor." We're looking for available labor, period – and for some businesses, the choice is to hire immigrants or close shop.

Think for a minute about one Texas sector that relies heavily on immigrant workers: construction. A typical Texas construction worker earns more than \$50,000 a year if he regularly works overtime. Employers say they do everything they can to attract native-born workers. But few young Americans want to do hard physical labor, particularly in our climate. And in the less-skilled construction trades – masonry, concrete, drywall, tile – more than 80 percent of Texas' workforce is Latino.

Meanwhile, sectors like farming, which compete with construction and pay less, often can't find workers. Things have gotten so bad this year that one Rio Grande Valley farmer had to stand by and watch as \$400,000 worth of cantaloupes rotted in the fields because he couldn't find workers to pick them.

These immigrant laborers aren't just the backbone of their companies; they're also the backbone of the regional economy. Out in the Rio Grande Valley, at least a dozen other local businesses – from grocery stores to companies that supply fertilizer and farm machinery – see their profits rise and fall with those of the local farm. And scores of native-born workers would be out of work if the farm closed or moved across the border.

As for construction, Dallas-area school systems alone underwent \$750 million worth of construction this summer. According to industry executives, without foreign-born workers, few of those new or renovated classrooms would have been ready when school opened this month.

You hear the same story across the U.S. A relatively small number of foreign workers keeps millions of native-born Americans employed. This, in turn, keeps the economy growing, and we all share in the prosperity that results.

Not only that, but immigrant workers renew and reinvigorate America. They remind us what it's like to give a job your all. We talk about old-fashioned family values; they live them. And those of us who cherish our faith and love our country can only rejoice at their devotion to both.

As chairmen, CEOs and stockholders, we call on Congress to act – to go back to Washington and pass realistic immigration reform that provides the workers we need to keep our businesses growing.

We understand that this will include workplace enforcement. In fact, we welcome reform that gives us the tools to stay on the right side of the law. The important thing is that this vital part of the economy be brought under the rule and protection of the law.

Neither the immigrants here today nor those we will need in the future should have to live in the shadows. These are good people with good values doing work that we need done, reaching for the American Dream and helping make it a reality for all. As we value the work, let us value the worker – and let's fix the law so that it serves all Americans.

Signed,

Bo Pilgrim

Pilgrim's Pride, Pittsburg

Harold Simmons

Contran Corporation, Dallas

Bob Perry

Perry Homes, Houston

Vance Miller

Henry S. Miller, Dallas

J. Huffines

Huffines Auto Group, Dallas

Red McCombs

McCombs Enterprises, San Antonio

W.L. Hunt

Hunt Building Corporation, El Paso

James Leininger

M.D., San Antonio

Phil Adams

Phil Adams Company, Bryan

Bob Barnes

Schlotsky's, Austin

Kent Hance

Hance Scarborough Wright, Dallas

Tom Loeffler

Loeffler Tuggey Pauerstein Rosenthal LLP, San Antonio

Louis Beecherl

Beecherl Investments, Dallas

Henry J. "Bud" Smith

Bud Smith Organization, Dallas

Dennis Nixon

IBC Bank, Laredo

Ernesto Ancira Jr.

Ancira Enterprises, San Antonio

Tom Hewitt

Interstate Hotels & Resorts

Tom Corcoran

FelCor Lodging Trust Inc.

Lionel Sosa

MATT.org, San Antonio

Henry Cisneros

CityView, San Antonio

Henry R. Muñoz III

Kell Muñoz Architects, San Antonio

Harold MacDowell

TDIndustries, Dallas

Pedro Aguirre

Aguirre Corporation, Dallas

Robert "Buddy" Barnes

Dee Brown Inc., Garland

Stephen M. Pitt

Boulder Imports, Houston

Brad Bouma

Select Milk Producers Inc., Plainview

Wayne Palla

Dairy Farmers of America, Grapevine

Jim Baird

Lone Star Milk Producers Inc., Windthorst

Randy Davis

Greenleaf Nursery, El Campo

Josh Bracken

Nicholson-Hardie Garden Centers, Dallas

David R. Pinkus

Tawakoni Plant Farm, Wills Point

Don Darby

Darby Greenhouses & Farms, Jacksonville

Georges Le Mener

Accor North America, Carrollton

Stevan Porter

InterContinental Hotels Group

John Caparella

Gaylord Hotels

Tony Farris

Quorum Hotels