

Rocky Mountain News

Help wanted in Colorado — from Mexico

Lawmakers want state to recruit laborers in Mexico

**By April M. Washington, Rocky Mountain News
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Two lawmakers from farm districts want Colorado to be the first state to create a guest worker program allowing immigrants to get visas to work here legally.

They plan to introduce a bill in January to establish a pilot program that calls for Colorado to open an employment office in Mexico.

Preliminary plans call for the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment or the Colorado Department of Agriculture to work directly with the Mexican government to expedite applications for work visas.

Sen. Abel Tapia, D-Pueblo, and Rep. Marsha Looper, R-Calhan, said that some southern and northern Colorado farmers are struggling to bring in their crops as migrants scared by crackdowns on illegal workers bypass the state.

"We're not talking about hiring illegal workers," Tapia said. "We're not talking about making immigrant workers U.S. citizens. We're talking about cutting through the bureaucracy and finding a way for people to work here legally."

Guest workers would be sought for farming, construction, service and oil-field jobs. Colorado's effort would be modeled, in part, after similar programs in Canada, Looper said.

Canadian provinces such as Alberta have contracts with individual states in Mexico to allow for guest workers.

"If we don't find a way to address the labor shortage, we're going to be in trouble," Looper said. "As it stands now, 40 percent of the state's produce is rotting on the vine."

Looper said farmers in her district aren't hiring migrant workers because they are afraid of getting raided or fined if they can't verify the workers' legal status.

"We need help, and we need to get help here legally," Looper said. "Ag is a big part of the economy in this state."

Tapia said migrant workers were scared by legislation passed in 2006 that requires state



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Jose Carmen Moralez, right, a worker at Petrocco Farms in Brighton, picks eggplants Tuesday. Foreman Jose Antonio Zavala, left, a third-generation seasonal farm worker, and Joe Petrocco, a fourth-generation farmer, stand behind him.

identification to get most government services and allowed police to check immigrants' legal status if stopped for a traffic infraction.

The idea of a guest worker program comes at a time when Congress remains deadlocked on comprehensive immigration reform.

With 2008 being a presidential election year, it's unlikely the federal government will establish a guest worker program, Tapia said.

Tapia estimates it would cost the state up to \$1 million to set up an employment office and properly track migrant workers. The state and employers also would be required to provide migrant housing and transportation, Tapia said.

But Rep. Ted Harvey, R-Highlands Ranch, a vocal critic of illegal immigration, said that any guest worker program should be created by the federal government and not individual states.

"I believe we need to ensure we have enough workers to help farmers, but perhaps they need to look for U.S. citizens and pay an appropriate wage for them to go out and work," Harvey said.

Tapia and Looper said Colorado farmers have depended on a immigrant work force for decades. The shortage of workers willing to pick potatoes, melons and other labor-intensive crops, they say, is real, not imaginary.

Last March, the Department of Corrections launched a pilot program to allow more than a dozen farms to contract with the state to provide low-risk female inmates to pick crops.

"Prison labor is a temporary fix," Tapia said. "It's a fix for Pueblo. It's not a fix of El Paso or Las Animas.

"I contend that the U.S. citizens are not there to be hired. There are just some labor jobs Americans do not want to do," he said.

What's next

- **If the legislature approves** the guest worker program, it likely won't go into effect until the 2009 planting season.
- **Legal hurdles** to the guest worker plan remain, said Cher Roybal Haavind, spokeswoman for the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment.
- **The U.S. State Department** and immigration enforcement agencies, for example, likely would have to give Colorado the green light to set up an employment office in Mexico.