

Immigration crackdown threatens bumper U.S. apple harvest

By Lisa W. Foderaro

Tuesday, August 21, 2007

HAMPTONBURGH, New York: With a look of supreme satisfaction, Jeff Crist squinted at the Ginger Golds and Jonamacs ripening under an incandescent sun on his apple orchard here: the trees were so laden that they almost seemed to strain under the effort.

"It's a vintage crop - a solid quality crop, which means good sugars in the apples," he said. "They should eat very nicely, almost like a good wine."

This is the third year in a row of near-perfect weather, and Crist, a fourth-generation apple grower, like many other growers in the Hudson Valley, is finally feeling secure after a disastrous string of harvests marred by early frost and hail. In fact, Crist is so bullish that he recently bought a 164-acre, or 66-hectare, orchard nearby, bucking the trend of recent decades of selling apple orchards to housing developers.

But while weather conditions have cooperated and industry experts say demand for apples across the United States has approached an all-time high, there are new fears in New York and around the country over whether there will be enough hands to pick the crop. The Bush administration announced new measures this month to crack down on employers of illegal immigrants.

Growers' associations across the country estimate that about 70 percent of farmworkers are illegal immigrants, many of them using fake Social Security numbers on their applications. Under the new rules, if the Social Security Administration finds that an applicant's information does not match its database, employers could be required to fire the worker or risk being fined up to \$10,000 for knowingly hiring an illegal immigrant.

"Farmers are required to validate the legal status of their workers, which they do," said Peter Gregg, a spokesman for the New York Apple Association, a nonprofit group representing more than 670 commercial apple growers in the state. "But a lot of times the paperwork is false, so they're unwittingly or unknowingly hiring workers who are here illegally. And then a raid will occur, and all of a sudden their workers will leave."

For apple growers in New York, where the forces of nature and the market have at last come together in their favor, the potential fallout from the new immigration initiative is particularly unsettling.

"We have three billion apples to pick this fall and every single one of them has to be picked by hand," Gregg said. "It's a very labor-intensive industry, and there is no local labor supply that we

can draw from, as much as we try. No one locally really wants to pick apples for six weeks in the fall."

Crist, who was recently named apple grower of the year by a leading fruit industry magazine, lobbied in Washington for passage of a new guest-worker program. But the program was included in the overall immigration overhaul legislation that collapsed on the Senate floor in late June. Growers say that only 2 percent of farmworkers nationwide come from the current guest-worker program, which, they say, is plagued by bureaucracy, low capacity and delays.

Another Hudson Valley apple grower, Mark Roe of Roe's Orchards in Blooming Grove, will get five workers through the existing program for the harvest this autumn. He said he planned to hire about seven other pickers. As for past workers, Roe said: "It's hard to tell who's legal and who's not. They all have documents."

He, too, is worried about the tougher immigration rules and what they might mean for his 240-acre fruit and vegetable farm, which was started by his great-great-grandfather in 1827 and is still worked by his grown children.

"We need something better, something grower-friendly," he said.

So far, the Hudson Valley has not been subject to the raids that have rippled through farms and orchards in western New York, especially in the Buffalo area.

"Last year, there were significantly more raids targeting agriculture in New York," Gregg said. "A lot of growers lost numerous workers at the peak of the harvest. They had to scramble to try to find someone else.

"It was difficult. In a lot of cases, there were apples left hanging on the trees."

For now, both Crist and Roe say they have enough pickers for the initial harvest. Workers are now plucking Ginger Golds, one of the first varieties to ripen, and placing them in wooden bins that each hold 2,000 to 3,000 apples.

A crew leader who for decades has recruited workers for Crist's orchards said that if the current source of labor dried up there would be few other alternatives. The workers are mostly Hispanic men who pick citrus fruits in Florida and then move north for the apple harvest.

Despite the labor concerns, growers seem to be optimistic, having emerged from the stretch of growing seasons that were devastated by storms and wild swings in temperature.

"Five or six years ago, we were ready to wrap up our affairs," said Crist, who owns six orchards totaling 600 acres in Orange and Ulster counties. "It looked pretty dismal, and a number of growers either chose to get out or they had to get out. There are less of us today than there used to be. But we're back on solid footing."

In the past two decades, the number of farms in Ulster County, the second-highest apple-producing county in New York State behind Wayne County, has steadily declined, according to Michael Fargione, an educator with Cornell Cooperative Extension, which provides research information and educational programs to farmers. In 1985, 104 farms covered 11,629 acres in Ulster County. By 1996, the number had slid to 63 orchards on 8,632 acres. And by 2001, the most recent year for which figures are available, there were 56 apple orchards on 5,669 acres.

But growers and agriculture experts say that in recent years fewer orchards in the Hudson Valley seem to have fallen to housing developers. "My impression is that over the last three years, the decline has either stabilized or at least reduced its rate," Fargione said.

Roe, whose farm stand was awash in the rosy hues of just-picked peaches and plums, said his family had no intention of selling.

Indeed, the weather this season - with ample rain and sunshine - seems to have strengthened his zest for farming.

"It's been practically perfect," he said. "It's just one of those things you hope for and dream about, and it rarely happens."