

# **J Carnes: Texas farms are suffering from a labor crisis**

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**J. Carnes**

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American farmers are living an unfolding labor crisis so much worse than a drought or a flood or a plague of locusts. But unlike those natural disasters, this one is entirely preventable, if we only had enough national leaders willing to act on common-sense solutions.

Instead, we're getting nothing but "get tough" laws and regulations that will bring dangerous consequences.

While row crops like corn and wheat have been successfully mechanized, the fact is that hand labor is still critical to bringing in the harvest of wholesome fresh fruit, vegetables, milk and meat. More than 80 percent of the hired labor force bringing in the harvest is foreign born, and likely two-thirds to three-quarters does not have proper immigration status.

Despite this, America's current dysfunctional immigration policy is one of "enforcement first, damn the consequences." This approach is driving our food productivity out of the U.S., plain and simple.

Here in Texas, we have the third-largest labor-intensive agricultural sector in the country. What is happening to it? In a recent Texas A&M study and survey, 77 percent of responding growers reported that they are actively scaling back their business because of labor concerns.

This means planting less, harvesting less and switching to subsidized row crops rather than free-market crops like fruit and vegetables. Almost 30 percent reported moving at least some of their operations out of the country. Many more are considering that option.

This year, a major Pecos County melon and onion grower decided to pack it in after 20 years and quit producing on 2,200 acres because of labor concerns. This means elimination of an annual payroll of \$2 million. More important to his community, it means \$2.6 million in local economic impact gone. His land is likely to go out of food production, perhaps forever.

My small business is good for our economy. From October to June, we employ a minimum of 75 people from Uvalde and surrounding communities. At peak harvest, that number can top 400.

In 2007, my operation paid more than \$2.8 million in wages directly to employees or through contract labor. We paid more than \$700,000 to local truckers to freight the product and more than \$3.6 million to local farms and businesses for products and services.

As production leaves the U.S., the giant sucking sound will be the shriveling of our rural economies.

Our policymakers keep bringing us more of the same dangerous policies. This month, President Bush announced new rules forcing federal contractors and subcontractors to electronically verify the eligibility of their workforce. Only a handful of farms across America could meet this test. Yet the immigration restrictionists cheered loudly.

Will they be cheering when our military and school lunch programs are forced to buy fruit, vegetables and milk from other countries to feed our troops and our children?

A solution for the farm labor crisis cannot wait until a new president and Congress decide to revisit this toughest of issues. The cost of losing control of our food supply is too great.

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