

S.C. farmers warn state can't fix problem

House set to debate legislation to punish employers who hire illegal workers knowingly

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S.C. farmers say the state's plans to clamp down on illegal immigration will only cause confusion and hurt the economy but will not solve the problem.

Today, the S.C. House is expected to debate legislation that would severely punish employers who hire illegal workers knowingly.

The proposal, as passed last week by the Senate, would require that employers verify their workers through a federal electronic database, a new paper-based system to be created by the state, or an S.C. driver's license.

Employers who break the law knowingly could be fined for each illegal immigrant on the payroll, up to \$10,000 each on a third offense.

Critics, including Gov. Mark Sanford, want the House to delete the paper-based verification option. Legislators say they must do what they can this year because Congress has failed to address immigration.

While farmers agree the current system is seriously flawed, they say anything the state comes up with won't fix it.

"I'm very concerned when state gets in an issue it can't do anything about," said Lexington County vegetable farmer Charles Wingard of W.P. Rawl & Sons, which employs about 300 people for 2,000 acres. "Immigration is a federal issue. It needs to stay there. We're just caught between several different parts of the government."

The Senate's vote last week broke a two-week stalemate between the chambers, with each blaming the other for not moving forward a compromise on how employers could verify their workers' legal status.

“I’ve never seen them have such an awful time, going back and forth and finger-pointing and blaming each other. It’s the strangest spectacle I’ve ever seen,” said peach farmer Lem Dillard.

The Greer farmer says all current verification systems are flawed. After farming for four decades, Dillard says he’s curtailed his operation from 50 acres to less than 10 — doing much of the work himself — and plans to retire next year to avoid the legal and paperwork hassle.

“It just gets real confusing when you have so many agencies to deal with,” said Dillard, 64, who hopes to hire some high-schoolers to pick this season. “The last three years I’ve struggled to have enough help to pick peaches. After this year, I won’t do it. I won’t subject myself to these ridiculous things.”

Farmers worry they won’t be able to continue farming because Americans don’t want the backbreaking jobs. Critics say Americans would take the jobs if employers paid more.

Billy Ledford, a Greenville County vegetable farmer for four decades, says he’s grown increasingly reliant over the past 15 years on Hispanic workers, who willingly work up to 12 hours a day in the summer for \$10 an hour. Locals won’t take the jobs, he said.

The 66-year-old farmer, who hires as many as 40 people on his 200 acre farm during the summer, said he gathers documents from his workers, who pay into Social Security, but he’s unsure if the papers are legitimate. It’s unfair for the state to make employers become immigration enforcers, he said.

“I’m really aggravated because we’ve got borders that are so easy to cross over. I’m just a farmer in the hills of South Carolina. Surely, they would not let me get in this situation,” Ledford said. “If they call us criminals, we might retire, though I don’t want to.”

Peach farmer Chalmers Carr will hire about 400 workers through a federal guest-worker program this year, which farmers complain is complicated and expensive. Under the program, Carr pays them \$8.51 an hour, must transport the workers to and from their native country, and provides housing while they’re here.

To qualify, Carr first must advertise the jobs locally. Of the nine citizens who have applied, only one remains on the job, he said.

“Let’s face it. Not too many people want to pick or thin peaches,” said Carr, of Titan Peach Farms in Ridge Spring. “It’s hard, physical work.”

He believes the state could put itself at an economic disadvantage to neighboring states.

“Whether it’s in agriculture or washing dishes, we need these workers,” Carr said. “Otherwise, they wouldn’t be here in the first place.”