

U.S. farmers, Mexican fields

Growers move operations across border so workers won't be deported

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CELAYA, MEXICO — Steve Scaroni, a farmer from California, looked across a luxuriant field of lettuce here in central Mexico and liked what he saw: full-strength crews of Mexican farm workers with no immigration problems.

Farming since he was a teenager, Scaroni, 50, built a \$50 million business growing lettuce and broccoli in California's Imperial Valley, relying on the hands of immigrant workers, most of them Mexicans and many probably in the United States illegally.

But early last year he began shifting part of his operation to rented fields here. Now some 500 Mexicans tend his crops in Mexico, where they run no risk of deportation.

"I'm as American red-blood as it gets," Scaroni said, "but I'm tired of fighting the fight on the immigration issue."

A sense of crisis prevails among American farmers who rely on immigrant laborers, more so since immigration legislation in the Senate failed in June and authorities announced a crackdown on employers of illegal immigrants. An increasing number of farmers have been testing the alternative of raising crops across the border where many of the workers are, according to growers and lawmakers in the U.S. and Mexico.

Western Growers, an association representing farmers in California and Arizona, conducted an informal survey of its members in the spring. Twelve large agribusinesses that acknowledged having operations in Mexico reported a total of 11,000 workers here.

Precise statistics are not readily available on American farming in Mexico, because growers seek to maintain a low profile for their operations abroad. But Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., displayed a map on the Senate floor in July locating more than 46,000 acres that American growers are cultivating in just two Mexican states, Guanajuato and Baja California.

"Farmers are renting land in Mexico," Feinstein said. "They don't want us to know that."

Feinstein favored a measure in the failed immigration bill that would have created a new guest worker program for agriculture and a special legal status for illegal immigrant farm workers.

The Labor Department has reported that 53 percent of the 2.5 million farm workers in the United States are illegal immigrants.

While there are benefits for Mexico, as American farmers bring the latest technology and techniques to the rich soil of its northern regions, American farm-state economists say that thousands of middle-class jobs supporting agriculture are being lost in the United States. Some lawmakers in the U.S. also point to security risks when food for Americans is increasingly produced in foreign countries.

Tromping through one of his first lettuce crops near Celaya, an agribusiness hub in the state of Guanajuato, Scaroni is more candid than many farmers about his move here. He had made six trips to Washington, he said, to plead with Congress to provide more legal immigrants for agriculture.

"I have a customer base that demands we produce and deliver product every day," he said. "They don't want to hear the excuses." Without legal workers in California, he said, "I have no choice but to offshore my operation."

Frustrated with experts who say that farmers with labor problems should mechanize, Scaroni plunges his hands into side-by-side lettuce plants, pulling out one crisp green head and one that is soggy and brown. After his company invested \$1 million in research, he said, "We haven't come up with a way to tell a machine what's a good head and what's a bad head."

He also dismisses arguments that he could attract workers by raising wages, saying Americans do not take the sweaty, seasonal field jobs.

Scaroni pays farmworkers here \$11 a day as opposed to about \$9 an hour in California, although Mexican workers are less productive in their own country, he said.

"It's not a cakewalk down here," he said. "At least I know the one thing I don't have to worry about is losing my labor force because of an immigration raid