

Upstate needs immigration reform



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Farms facing raids as Congress ignores immigration issue

One of the enduring myths about America's immigration problem is that the industrial Northeast is somehow exempt from the issues of undocumented workers, border agents and besieged farmers.

Tell that to the seasonal farm workers in the fields of Wayne, Ontario, Orleans and other counties in the Rochester region. Thousands of migrant laborers arrive at upstate farms each year, and in that number are many without proper visas.

Some are arrested and deported; some sneak through. But all, including the farmers, live and work in fear and trepidation. That will be the case until Congress summons the good sense and moral sensibility to pass a comprehensive immigration bill, one that combines strong border controls with a efficient guest-worker program and a path to citizenship for the 12 million or so illegal immigrants living in this country.

Actually, the fear of arrest is stronger this spring, as raids on local farms and arrests are on the rise. Deportations upstate have increased by nearly 40 percent since 2005, and the number of border agents has doubled.

The problem is not that the government is enforcing the law. But enforcement must not be the entire story. And it has been for too long. For example, a recent bill in the Senate that would have streamlined the guest-worker program, called H-2A, was shot down. That means that farmers and workers in this region will be stuck with the muddled bureaucracy of the existing program.

The New York Farm Bureau argues that the current immigration climate means farmers will stop growing crops that can't be harvested mechanically. That portends less variety from upstate fields, less income for farmers and still-higher prices.

Comprehensive immigration reform is a national imperative. Congress and the presidential candidates must face it head-on.