

After immigration crackdown, farmers mull planting

By KATE BRUMBACK, Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — It's unclear whether farmers in Georgia and Alabama will face a shortage of workers due to tough new laws targeting illegal immigration, but some producers said they have begun changing their plans for planting and harvesting this year's crops.

Some farmers said they might reduce the number of acres they plant or shift to less labor-intensive crops, while others are bracing for higher labor prices and have turned to new recruiting tools to attract workers.

"We're expecting some shifts, but it's a bit too early to tell," said Charles Hall, executive director of the Georgia Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association.

Georgia and Alabama have approved laws that have tough enforcement provisions that farmers say are scaring migrant workers away from the states.

Since the laws were approved last year, farmers in both states have reported labor shortages because migrant workers aren't showing up and they say they can't find other workers to fill the jobs. Farmers and state officials have said that some produce was left to rot in the field last year because there weren't enough workers to help with the harvest.

Farmers have claimed not enough U.S. citizens want the jobs, but some said the issue is actually that producers won't offer a high enough wage to attract legal workers.

Brett Hall, Alabama's deputy agriculture commissioner, said nurseries across south Alabama are trying to find workers to fill about 2,000 jobs ahead of the spring growing season. Many nursery growers are staffing job fairs in hopes of attracting employees, he said.

Other growers aren't ordering seeds or new equipment because they anticipate a labor shortage, he said.

"Before this law, migrant workers would just show up. They knew when they were needed," Hall said. "That's not happening anymore."

In Georgia, some growers of the state's famed Vidalia onions are planting fewer acres of the labor-intensive crop, which could lead to a roughly 10 percent drop in production, said Bob Stafford, director of the Vidalia Onion Business Council.

Stafford said it's unclear if the smaller crop will mean consumers will pay more for the prized sweet onions because prices are dependent on many factors, including the weather and fuel costs.

Aries Haygood, chairman of the Vidalia Onion Committee, said he has reduced planting by about 15 percent at his farm near Lyons, Ga., because of labor concerns and other factors.

Haygood and some other farmers in both states are using a federal guest worker program, known as H-2A, which lets farmers bring in an unlimited number of temporary agriculture workers.

But some complain it's too expensive and doesn't allow enough flexibility.

Haygood said it's also tough to get the timing just right and sometimes his workers' visas run out before the end of the harvest.

Some members of Georgia's congressional delegation have proposed changes to the H-2A program, notably allowing farmers to provide workers with vouchers to obtain housing nearby rather than being required to provide on-site housing.

Dawson Morton, a lawyer with the Georgia Legal Services Program, dismissed complaints about the guest worker program, arguing the real issue is farmers don't want to pay a legal wage or provide basic housing.

"The H-2A conditions are hardly extravagant," Morton said. "They're so modest that most Americans aren't willing to accept them."

Morton noted that a report by Georgia Agriculture Commissioner Gary Black showed that some farmers believe legal workers are more expensive and won't work as hard.

"Gary Black's report shows that there is an attempt by agriculture to shape policy to get themselves as cheap a labor force as possible," Morton said. "This doesn't look like an industry that's interested in complying with the law or that's interested in paying a legal wage."

Two of the biggest Vidalia farmers, Delbert Bland and R.T. Stanley, said they don't plan to reduce their crops.

Bland has used the federal guest worker program for years, and Stanley said he would likely request a crew of guest workers to supplement his other workers during the height of the harvest.

"I'm getting them planted all right," Stanley said. "But when it gets to be time to harvest them in April or May, I'm concerned."

Rather than reducing acreage, Kent Hamilton, who has vegetable farms near Tifton, Ga., plans to increase his sweet corn, cucumber and bell pepper crops by 15 percent because he thinks other growers will plant less.

Hamilton has used the federal guest worker program for years. He generally brings in about 400 temporary foreign workers but is building more housing to accommodate 515 this year.

Darvin Eason farms blackberries, cotton and peanuts in Lenox, deep in south Georgia.

Cotton and peanuts can be harvested mechanically, but blackberries must be picked by hand, requiring a lot of workers for a period of several weeks.

"If you don't pick them every day, you lose some. They start to fall on the ground," he said.

A relatively small-scale farmer, Eason's 4 acres of bushes produce about 50,000 pounds of berries a year. But having made a hefty investment in the bushes, he can't easily reduce his harvest this year. His labor contractor has already told him he'll likely have to pay higher wages this year because it's going to be tougher to find workers.