

Ag leaders push for immigration reform

California agriculture can't survive without foreign-born workers, leaders say

[By DONNA JONES - Santa Cruz Sentinel](#)

WATSONVILLE - In California, 98 percent of farm laborers are immigrants and two-thirds lack authorization to work in the U.S.

The U.S. Department of Labor statistics underscore the reason the California State Board of Food and Agriculture spent more than four hours on the topic of immigration reform Tuesday at the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds.

The lack of reform and heightened enforcement, along with barriers to housing and transportation, are putting California's nearly \$40 billion agricultural industry at risk, speakers told the board.

"We need to be unified as an agricultural community to convince the federal government that something needs to be done in a very short period to legitimize our labor force," said Sam Turner of Calistoga-based T & M Agricultural Services.

Turner said Napa County is experiencing a severe labor shortage. Trends indicate it could get worse.

No other industry relies as heavily on foreign workers as agriculture, said Philip Martin, a UC Davis professor and chairman of the UC Comparative Immigration & Integration Program. And growers in no other state depend so much on immigrants, particularly from Mexico. But in recent years, Martin said, four workers have returned to Mexico for every one who arrives.

Miles Reiter, chairman and chief executive officer of Driscoll's Berries and a member of the state board, said while a guest worker program is needed, agriculture shouldn't give up on home-grown labor, especially the use of high school or college students to supplement the workforce at peak times.

"There jobs are well-suited to young people, 15 to 25, who need to make extra money," Reiter said.

Statistics show it might be a hard sell. Of 35,000 domestic workers referred to growers by state employment departments nationally in 2010, 68 percent rejected the jobs outright, and another 27 percent either didn't show up for work or left before it was done, said Carol House, a National Academics of Science statistician.

But Reiter said growers, worried it will be a "big headache," haven't tried hard enough. He said it's not a short-term solution, but he urged the creation of a task force to brainstorm ideas on how to make it work.

Manuel Cunha of the Nisei Farmers League said stepped-up enforcement also is disrupting local economies. One San Joaquin Valley packer lost 70 percent of its workforce when immigration authorities conducted an audit and found undocumented workers, he said. Such actions ripple through communities as growers have no place to send their harvests, pickers lose jobs and workers flee the area with their families.

"It damages communities. It damages families," Cunha said.

Authorities should focus instead on the human and drug traffickers, who are increasingly preying on vulnerable immigrants, he said.

"I didn't believe it until I saw it," Cunha said. "One of our biggest problems is the safety of farmworkers and their families."

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