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Colorado Farms Push Bennet on Immigration as Peppers Rot

By Jennifer Oldham - May 29, 2013

As he surveyed a field of three-week-old sweet corn, Colorado farmer [Bob Sakata](#) told how a shortage of hands to pack the vegetable forced him to downsize his operations by 40 percent over the past decade.

“We were farming close to 4,000 acres and we cut it back to 2,400,” said Sakata, 87, who has farmed in the state for 67 years. “It has a big economic impact on the community. We used to hire 400 people and last year it was 191.”

Even as unemployment remains above pre-recession levels, at 6.9 percent in April, industries that are pillars of Colorado’s economy, including agriculture, tourism and technology, share a common predicament: They can’t find enough employees, weakening their ability to remain competitive and profitable, their owners and executives say.

Sakata is among business leaders who took their concerns to U.S. Senator Michael Bennet, co-author of the first major overhaul of the nation’s immigration law in almost 30 years. Bennet said he incorporated their concerns in the bill.

“I think what we and they discovered along the way is that there are enough folks that want to fix this that if we put our mind to it, we could actually fix it,” the 48-year-old [Colorado](#) Democrat said in an interview. “It was surprising to a lot of people that it was as big of an issue as it was.”

The Senate plans to start work on the legislation, known as [S744](#), the week of June 10. The Judiciary Committee approved the measure 13-5 on May 21.

Business Concerns

Among the issues raised by Colorado business leaders: The shortage of farm workers caused growers to lose thousands of dollars when squash and peppers went unpicked last fall. Unanswered ads for ranch hands meant calves died because no one was available to deliver them. A dearth of bilingual ski instructors prompted Brazilians to vacation elsewhere. An absence of software engineers doubled production cycles for technology companies.

“I have a bunch of openings on my website I can’t fill,” said JB Holston, chairman and founding chief executive officer of Denver-based NewsGator Technologies Inc., a social media aggregation company.

“For every three months I have to be out searching for six people, that’s delayed a product in production by one life cycle,” Holston said. “In my business, that kills us. We emulate what [Facebook \(FB\)](#), Instagram and Twitter do but we do it for very large corporations so it’s all secure and scalable. The faster we can emulate those things the better we’re serving our customers.”

Citizenship Path

Companies throughout the U.S. could gain access to both lower-skilled and higher-skilled workers who are in this country on visas if the proposal is enacted. The bill would also offer the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants in this country a path to citizenship.

Colorado business executives said in interviews that they communicated to Bennet and his staff the urgency of their concerns that years of labor shortages are causing their companies, like those in other states, to lose business opportunities to other countries.

“We put all this energy on getting and educating people from other countries here and we don’t let them stay and create innovative companies,” said [Brad Feld](#), managing director at the Foundry Group, a Boulder-based venture capital firm. “[Canada](#) and the U.K. have adopted various immigration policies that are essentially a copy of the stuff we’ve been talking about.”

Foreign entrepreneurs looking to start companies in America would be eligible for visas under Bennet’s signature contribution to the Senate’s immigration plan. According to the senator’s staff, one of every 10 Colorado entrepreneurs is an immigrant.

Faster Growth

Colorado’s immigrant population growth outpaced the nation in the past decade, with newcomers comprising 11.4 percent of the state’s labor force. Yet companies in the state are still in need of immigrants as full-and part-time employees for both blue-collar jobs and professional positions.

Immigrant workers comprise one in 10 employees in the state’s professional, scientific, administrative services, manufacturing, agriculture and mining fields, and two of every 10 people in the construction industry, according to a Feb. 14 [report](#) by the Colorado Center on Law & Policy, a Denver-based social justice nonprofit.

“Immigrants are a rising proportion of the labor force and contribute significantly to Colorado’s total economic output,” wrote Christopher Stiffler, an economist at the [center](#), in the report. “In fact, immigrants contribute approximately \$42 billion dollars in total output to the Colorado economy.”

To keep this piece of the economy afloat, business leaders said, they need access to a more efficient, less expensive visa system that allows for more guest workers to do seasonal jobs and skilled laborers to fill full-time ranch and tech positions.

‘Global Industry’

“Agriculturalists such as myself, we are in a global industry, we’re in competition with producers across the world,” said T. Wright Dickinson, president of the Arvada-based [Colorado Cattlemen’s Association](#).

“If we can’t import a workforce you will see these farms and ranches move offshore,” added Dickinson, whose family owns a ranch in the northwestern part of the state.

The current visa program available to agriculture operators is cumbersome and the rules change from year to year, Dickinson said. The Senate immigration bill would simplify the process for hiring guest workers by replacing the current system with a visa process administered by the U.S. Agriculture Department and by giving undocumented farm workers a faster path to citizenship, according to a bill summary provided by Bennet’s office.

Simplified Process

Colorado vegetable grower [David Petrocco Sr.](#) said a simplified visa process might have helped him find 40 workers he lacked in 2012. The shortage forced him to leave peppers, squash and green beans to rot in the fields. Petrocco said he needs as many as 375 hands to tend and harvest 2,600 acres from July through September.

“All the vegetables in the state are harvested during those months, as well as fruits on the Western slope, melons in the south and onions in the north,” Petrocco said as he walked across a field brimming with fragile onion seedlings near Greeley, about 56 miles (90 kilometers) north of Denver.

“There always seems to be a point in the season where farm labor runs short,” he added. “We’ve been short enough to where we weren’t able to harvest all our crops and we lost thousands of dollars.”

Ski Resorts

The revamped guest worker program included in immigration legislation would also help ski resorts hire temporary housekeepers, food and beverage servers, lift operators and ski instructors when they’re ramping up for the season in November, said Melanie Mills, president and chief executive of [Colorado Ski Country USA](#), a Denver-based trade group.

“We’ve been pretty unsuccessful in bringing in workers even though we know they are out there -- we leave business on the table,” she said.

“One of our top markets is [Brazil](#), they like to come on ski holiday and bring their extended family and they want instructors who speak Portuguese,” she added. “They can come to Colorado, or they can go to Europe where they know they can find ski instructors who speak their language.”

Colorado's 10,000 technology companies, which employ the [third-highest](#) concentration of such workers in the country, said they need more visas for highly-skilled employees. The legislation would raise the number of visas -- something sought by tech companies for years.

Increased Funding

Managers in the industry are also interested in increased funding in the immigration reform bill to train more Americans for these jobs.

“If we can get through immigration reform, I’ll employ more software engineers and I’ll be able to get them where they exist,” said Holston, NewsGator’s founder. “We certainly envision doubling our technical team here in the U.S. over the next two to three years -- if we can find folks and hire them fast enough.”

<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-05-30/colorado-farms-push-bennet-on-immigration-as-peppers-rot.html>