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Immigrant Farm Workers' Challenge: Take Our Jobs

By Juliana Barbassa

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In a tongue-in-cheek call for immigration reform, farm workers are teaming up with comedian Stephen Colbert to challenge unemployed Americans: Come on, take our jobs.

Farm workers are tired of being blamed by politicians and anti-immigrant activists for taking work that should go to Americans and dragging down the economy, said Arturo Rodriguez, the president of the United Farm Workers of America.

So the group is encouraging the unemployed _ and any Washington pundits or anti-immigrant activists who want to join them to apply for the some of thousands of agricultural jobs being posted with state agencies as harvest season begins.

All applicants need to do is fill out an online form under the banner "I want to be a farm worker" at <http://www.takeourjobs.org>, and experienced field hands will train them and connect them to farms.

According to the Labor Department, three out of four farm workers were born abroad, and more than half are illegal immigrants.

Proponents of tougher immigration laws have argued that farmers have become used to cheap labor and don't want to raise wages enough to draw in other workers.

Those who have done the job have some words of advice for applicants: First, dress appropriately.

During summer, when the harvest of fruits and vegetables is in full swing in California's Central Valley, temperatures hover in the triple digits. Heat exhaustion is one of the reasons farm labor consistently makes the Bureau of Labor Statistics' top ten list of the nation's most dangerous jobs.

Second, expect long days. Growers have a small window to pick fruit before it is overripe.

And don't count on a big paycheck. Farm workers are excluded from federal overtime provisions, and small farms don't even have to pay the minimum wage. Fifteen states don't require farm labor to be covered by workers compensation laws.

Any takers?

"The reality is farmworkers who are here today aren't taking any American jobs away. They work in often unbearable situations," Rodriguez said. "I don't think there will be many takers, but the offer is being made. Let's see what happens."

To highlight how unlikely the prospect of Americans lining up to pick strawberries or grapes, Comedy Central's "Colbert Report" plans to feature the "Take Our Jobs" campaign on July 8.

The campaign is being played for jokes, but the need to secure the right to work for immigrants who are here is serious business, said Michael Rubio, supervisor in Kern County, one of the biggest ag producing counties in the nation.

"Our county, our economy, rely heavily on the work of immigrant and unauthorized workers," he said. "I would encourage all our national leaders to come visit Kern County and to spend one day, or even half a day, in the shoes of these farm workers."

Hopefully, the message will go down easier with some laughs, said Manuel Cunha, president of the California grower association Nisei Farmers League, who was not a part of the campaign.

"If you don't add some humor to this, it's enough to get you drinking, and I don't mean Pepsi," Cunha said, dismissing the idea that Americans would take up the farm workers' offer.

California's agriculture industry launched a similar campaign in 1998, hoping to recruit welfare recipients and unemployed workers to work on farms, he said. Three people showed up.

"Give us a legal, qualified work force. Right now, farmers don't know from day to day if they're going to get hammered by ICE," he said, referring to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. "What happens to my labor pool?"

His organization supports AgJobs, a bill currently in the Senate which would allow those who have worked in U.S. agriculture for at least 150 days in the previous two years to get legal status.

The bill has been proposed in various forms since the late 1990s, with backing from the United Farm Workers of America and other farming groups, but has never passed.