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Farms a casualty of immigration war

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On more than 10,000 acres of drained swampland in western New York, Maureen Torrey's family farm grows an assortment of vegetables in the dark, nutrient-rich soil known as "Elba Muck."

Like other farms in the area, Torrey Farms, Inc. of Elba, N.Y., depends on seasonal labor, mainly undocumented field hands from Mexico, to pick, package and ship their cabbage, cucumbers, squash, green beans and onions throughout the nation.

With the peak harvest season at hand, Torrey's concerns about a labor shortage are growing. A crackdown on illegal immigration, more job opportunities in Mexico and rising fees charged by smugglers are reducing the number of immigrants who cross the U.S. border each year to help make up more than 60 percent of U.S. farm workers.

The American Farm Bureau Federation projects $5 billion to $9 billion in annual produce industry losses because of the labor shortages that have become commonplace for Torrey.

"Five years ago, we had 10 (applicants) for every job we had on our farm," said Torrey, who handles sales and finances for the family business. "In the last year that wasn't the case. We hired anybody that showed up for field work. It'll be interesting to see how many people we have knocking on the door this year."

With the cherry harvest underway in south central Washington state, the Sage Bluff farm-worker housing compound in Malaga, Wash., is only half full, nowhere near the 270 farm workers it can accommodate.

"I would say we're significantly short," said Jesse Lane, housing manager for the Washington Growers League, which runs Sage Bluff. "I had a grower contact me who said he only had 20 pickers and he needed over a hundred."

In California, farmers are reporting 30 percent to 40 percent labor shortages, said Bryan Little, director of labor affairs for the California Farm Bureau Federation. He said some cherry growers have left acres unpicked because they don't have enough workers.

"Generally, what I hear is that if you need 10 crews to harvest 40 acres of strawberries, you only have seven. If you need a crew of 10 people, then you only have six or seven. It varies, depending on where you are in the state."

The problem is particularly hard on small farms that need work crews for only a few days. Even though 60 percent of hired farm labor work on farms with annual sales of less than $1 million, most field pickers would rather work for weeks or months at a time at larger farms, said Manuel Cunha, president of the Nisei Farmers League in Fresno, Calif.

“They’re not going to leave their full-time growers to work for a day or two on the small farms, so a lot of fruit isn’t getting picked,” Cunha said. “The shortage is tight and it’s getting tighter.”

Border patrol agents no longer pose the biggest risk for Mexican workers who cross the U.S. border, Cunha said. Drug cartels and human traffickers now prey on immigrants, forcing them to transport drugs and kidnapping their relatives to make sure they comply.

FEAR FACTOR

“They are told, ‘you will carry this or you’re gone,’ ” Cunha said. “It’s no more ‘would you like to try this?’ ”

Traffickers and smugglers have also entered the labor contracting industry, forcing groups of undocumented immigrants to work certain jobs against their will and then stealing or skimming from their paychecks. To avoid them, many undocumented workers simply stay in America after the harvest season. “Workers won’t go home and the workers that do go home will not come back because they’re afraid,” Cunha said.

The problems have exacerbated shortages of migrant workers all across the nation. With comprehensive immigration reform by Congress unlikely in a heated election year, many say the answer is to overhaul the H-2A federal guest worker program so visiting farm workers could stay in America and work toward legal immigration status.

The H-2A program allows employers to hire temporary foreign workers to fill seasonal labor shortages if there’s a lack of available domestic workers. But a recent survey by the NCAE found 72 percent of program users said that the guest workers arrive an average of 22 days after they’re needed, making the program too slow and cumbersome for the time-sensitive harvest season. That’s why growers largely avoid the program, which provided a high of just 64,000 visas in 2008.

TURNING TO GRAIN

Because labor makes up nearly half the production cost for fruit and 35 percent for vegetables, farmers facing labor shortages are switching to crops such as corn, soybeans, cotton and peanuts, of which harvesting depends more on machinery than on manpower.

“You don’t make as much money on them, but you don’t put nearly as much into them and you don’t have the labor costs,” said Frank Gasperini, executive vice president of the National Council of Agricultural Employers.

Torrey Farms has followed the trend. They grow field corn, which is used for grain, on 3,500 acres currently, up from 2,000 acres 10 years ago. Labor accounts for only 5 percent of corn's production cost.

"We keep chipping away at our (specialty) vegetable numbers," she said of corn's growing presence in the family business. "It's pretty common around here. You drive around the neighborhood, I'm talking like in a four-county area going 70 miles each way, you don't see new packing sheds, you see shiny new grain bins."

The shortage affects not only farmers, but their communities as convenience stores, gas stations and restaurants that cater to farm workers begin to lay off employees or close.

A University of Georgia survey estimated that worker shortages cost Georgia growers $70 million in crop losses last year when only 7,000 seasonal workers came for the harvest and 12,000 were needed. Many Hispanic labor crews avoided the state because of Georgia's stiff new immigration law, House Bill 87, which allowed police to check the immigration status of certain suspects.

Georgia's governor appealed for jobless state residents to work the fields, but transportation to rural areas proved difficult, as did the grueling nature of the work. Across the country, American-born domestic workers have been unwilling to work the fields.

'POLITICAL FOOTBALL'

So far, Florida's 47,500 farms have not seen the kind of labor shortages that are affecting agriculture in states with new immigration legislation, but local farmers say that if Florida were to tighten its policies, they too would have problems finding enough workers to bring in the crops. "It's tough for us to be in the middle of a political issue and for people to be using this as a political football," said Jim Strickland, a cattleman with more than 6,000 acres that he also uses to grow oranges.

"If you look and see what kind of devastation happened for our famer friends in Georgia and Alabama, you see that we need a good immigration policy on the federal level."

Strickland and other famers interviewed also oppose the E-Verify system, which checks employees' immigration statuses through a database from the Department of Homeland Security, because they say the process is too slow.

"A lot of those ideas in Washington sound good on paper, but they don't work when they get to the farm," Strickland said.

In January of 2011, Gov. Rick Scott issued an order requiring employers with government agencies to use E-Verify, promising to extend the regulation to all employers. But last month he modified his position amid complaints from agricultural groups, saying that he now favors national reform.

Broward County Farm Bureau president said that agricultural producers are not looking for amnesty, but rather a “comprehensive legislative reform that ensures the labor supply.”

Read more here: http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/07/02/v-print/2879156/farms-a-casualty-of-immigration.html