

# Farmers fret about getting workers under immigration plan

By McClatchy-Tribune, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.23.13

Word Count **960**



A seasonal guest worker hauls flats of strawberries to a field truck during the harvest at Patterson Farm in China Grove, North Carolina, on Thursday, May 16, 2013. Photo: Davis Turner/MCT

WASHINGTON — Walk in any neighborhood grocery store today and you are as likely to find tomatoes picked in Mexico as in California, and oranges from Brazil as from Florida.

Farmers across the country warn that even more imported food will be on store shelves if Congress fails to pass immigration legislation. They need the law to guarantee there are enough workers to milk cows and harvest fruits and vegetables.

“The bottom line is people need to decide whether they’d rather import their labor or import their food,” said Randall Patterson, a North Carolina farmer who grows strawberries, cucumbers and watermelons.

The 52-year-old third-generation farmer legally employs about 140 foreign-born workers on his 1,200-acre farm through a system similar to the one a group of senators wants to streamline.

## **Left To Rot**

But crops are being left to rot in fields from Florida to California and Washington state because farmers cannot find enough workers willing to pick their crops. Many of their former workers no longer show up because they fear being stopped by police on their way to the fields and deported. Many already have been.

Of an estimated 2 million farm workers, 70 percent are believed to be working here illegally.

Figuring out what to do about farm labor shortages has been one of the less controversial issues in the immigration debate in Washington. Many Republicans and Democrats agree that the industry is suffering because of a broken immigration system that has workers living in the shadows.

But solving the matter has been complicated because of opposition from those on the far ends of the debate. Many of those on the right oppose providing any legal path for those here illegally, and many of those on the left argue that the farm labor must be addressed only as part of a wider plan.

## **Path To Citizenship**

A proposal in the Senate that would create a path to citizenship for the estimated 11 million people living in the United States illegally. It would fast-track the legalization for agriculture workers.

They would be granted special legal status. After five years, farm workers could apply for permanent residency and eventually citizenship. The bill also calls for the U.S. Department of Agriculture to hand out guest worker visas, rather than the Department of Labor, to ensure a sufficient workforce.

The main argument against legalizing immigrant agriculture workers is that those jobs ought to be held by Americans rather than people who broke the country's immigration laws. Some say Americans would do farm work if growers paid a fair wage.

One of the most outspoken opponents of the Senate plan, Sen. Jeff Sessions, a Republican from Alabama, raised those points at a recent Senate hearing.

"I'm also dubious about the idea that there are jobs Americans won't do," Sessions said. "I worked construction in the Alabama sun, hauling lumber and stuff. I know Americans do that every single day, tough work that's done every day."

## **Not Many U.S.-Born Farm Workers**

Yet, there are few U.S.-born farm workers in the fields.

Charles Conner, president of the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives, a trade group, said the country couldn't continue to produce as much food as it produces without its foreign-born workers.

"If that labor was not available to us," Conner said, "... it would mean that we would get that food from somewhere else beyond the borders of the United States. And that's just crazy to think that we would allow that to happen."

Citing a 2008 study, he said 80,000 acres worth of fresh fruit and vegetable production in California alone has been moved outside the United States because of labor shortages. Meanwhile, Americans want more and more information about the food they eat. They also want it to be locally grown.

Only seven U.S.-born workers in North Carolina completed the entire growing season in 2011, according to a new study by two groups that support changing immigration laws. Just 268 out of nearly 500,000 unemployed North Carolinians applied for 6,500 available jobs, according to information gathered by the North Carolina Growers Association. More than 90 percent of those applying were hired, but just 163 showed up for the first day of work.

## **Caps Could Be Reached Early**

The Senate plan would put a cap on the number of guest worker agriculture visas at 112,333 a year. A House proposal introduced by Judiciary Committee Chairman Bob Goodlatte, a Virginia Republican, would cap the number of guest worker visas at 500,000. The secretary of agriculture could raise or lower the cap based on market demands. But some growers like Patterson worry that there is a cap at all.

"How do they know after writing all that reform how many workers I'm going to need at my farm?" he asked. "Einstein couldn't figure that out."

The North Carolina Growers Association, of which Patterson is a member, is one of the few groups that uses the current guest worker plan. Lee Wicker, the association's deputy director, estimates his members employ about 7,500 workers under the program.

But he said that if the proposed legislation works and the illegal workforce is really blocked, then farmers would have few options other than the guest worker program. Wicker worries the caps are not nearly large enough to accommodate the need for workers. Based on the fact that North Carolina has a later growing season than California and more southern regions, Wicker worries that his farmers could be left out of the mix if the caps are reached before the Carolina growing season gets going.

"We're scared about the cap because a farmer could invest a huge amount of money and time planting and growing his crop" and not know if they could get enough workers to harvest the crops, he said.

## Quiz

- 1 Read the sentence from the article.

*The 52-year-old third-generation farmer legally employs about 140 foreign-born workers on his 1,200-acre farm through a system similar to the one a group of senators wants to streamline.*

In the sentence above the word "streamline" most closely means

- (A) reject
  - (B) reduce
  - (C) simplify
  - (D) eliminate
- 2 Which paragraph from "Left To Rot" contains a synonym for the word "debatable"?
- 3 What type of figurative language is the phrase, "living in the shadows"?
- (A) alliteration
  - (B) metaphor
  - (C) personification
  - (D) simile
- 4 Read the sentence from the article.

*"I'm also dubious about the idea that there are jobs Americans won't do," Sessions said.*

What is the meaning of the word "dubious" as it is used in the sentence above?

- (A) annoyed
- (B) certain
- (C) doubtful
- (D) fearful

## Answer Key

- 1 Read the sentence from the article.

*The 52-year-old third-generation farmer legally employs about 140 foreign-born workers on his 1,200-acre farm through a system similar to the one a group of senators wants to streamline.*

In the sentence above the word "streamline" most closely means

- (A) reject
  - (B) reduce**
  - (C) simplify
  - (D) eliminate
- 2 Which paragraph from "Left To Rot" contains a synonym for the word "debatable"?

**Paragraph 6:**

**Figuring out what to do about farm labor shortages has been one of the less controversial issues in the immigration debate in Washington. Many Republicans and Democrats agree that the industry is suffering because of a broken immigration system that has workers living in the shadows.**

- 3 What type of figurative language is the phrase, "living in the shadows"?
- (A) alliteration
  - (B) metaphor**
  - (C) personification
  - (D) simile

- 4 Read the sentence from the article.

*"I'm also dubious about the idea that there are jobs Americans won't do," Sessions said.*

What is the meaning of the word "dubious" as it is used in the sentence above?

- (A) annoyed
- (B) certain
- (C) doubtful**
- (D) fearful