

# U.S. agriculture a balancing act

Published on Sun, May 29, 2011

A piecemeal approach to immigration reform is the politically easy option, but there will be unintended negative consequences unless Congress addresses the whole problem.

An effective system to verify a job applicant's eligibility to work in the United States is an essential part of immigration reform. So are tough employer sanctions for those who hire the undocumented.

But if Congress just mandates the use of the employee-screening E-Verify system without dealing with labor demands, the job magnet will remain and the economy will suffer.

The agriculture industry is forthright in saying that up to 70 percent of its workforce is undocumented. There are no Americans to take those jobs.

"Are you raising your child to be a farmworker?" asks Tom Nassif, president of the Western Growers Association, which represents growers in California and Arizona. He says his industry has been trying to educate Congress about the simple fact that making E-Verify mandatory without addressing labor needs "wipes out agriculture."

John McClung, president of the Texas Produce Association, says E-Verify in isolation would be "the death knell" of agriculture in the United States. Without workers, farmers would move their cropland to where the labor is: Mexico and Central America. Nassif says two to three non-farm jobs are created for every farm job, so the result would be widespread job losses in the United States.

The other likely result, as Joe Sigg of the Arizona Farm Bureau points out, would be "under-the-table and off-the-books" employment.

Research bears this out. The nonpartisan Immigration Policy Center study, "Deeper Into the Shadows," found workers who lost their jobs because of enforcement tended to return to work - often at the same job - on a cash-only basis. They were generally paid less and became more vulnerable to exploitation.

E-Verify alone will create problems because it does not deal with the need for labor.

Yet House Judiciary Committee Chairman Lamar Smith, R-Texas, said he will introduce a bill mandating E-Verify. Some expect there will be hearings within a few weeks.

Agriculture interests have been lobbying Congress to grant them an exemption, or to add a guest-worker program for new laborers and a legalization process to keep experienced workers on the job. The current agricultural guest-worker program, H2A, is "unworkable and maybe unfixable," Nassif says.

Let's be clear: This nation needs an employee-verification system. But not in isolation. What's more, E-Verify needs improvement.

The National Immigration Law Center, an immigrant advocacy group, says mandating its use nationwide would force millions of people to correct false information in the system or lose their jobs. It would put nearly 800,000 people out of work because of database errors. What's more, E-Verify cannot detect identity fraud.

No verification system can shut off the job magnet as long as there is a demand for migrant labor. And there is a demand - not just in agriculture, but in the hospitality, construction and other

## **U.S. agriculture a balancing act**

Published on Immigration Policy Center (<http://www.immigrationpolicy.org>)

---

labor-intensive industries.

An improved E-Verify-type system needs to be part of a solution that brings in guest workers and allows the current undocumented workforce to remain on the job.

Politically, it may be much easier to enact a partial solution. But the consequences of doing so will be tough on industries like agriculture.

**Published in the Arizona Republic**

**Source URL:** <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/newsroom/clip/us-agriculture-balancing-act>