

Opinion

Growers Contend with Weather, Potential Worker Shortages, and Politics in 2017

By Frank Gasperini

National Council of Ag Employers

As New York apple producers, you know the debate over farm labor shortages continues to be a major political issue in addition to an economic and productivity concern. Many held out hopes that a change in government would bring quick relief, so far it has not.

It is important that we keep all our elected officials as well as our non-farm contacts up to date on our needs for a stable agricultural workforce, and on the realities of producing the nation's food.

Apple producers are a perfect example of labor intensive agriculture in that you must employ hired workers for at least seasonal work. While you, and other labor intensive producers, make up less than half the total number of farms in America, you employ the largest number of farm workers. In fact, you employ a significant percentage of the estimated 1.5 million seasonal workers in agriculture each year. And those 1.5 to 2 million seasonal workers support an estimated 3 to 5 million off-farm jobs in packing, shipping, and retail to support the farming and growing operations

Agriculture, particularly labor intensive agriculture, is an important source of American jobs, in addition to



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supplying the food we need every day. Your presence and economic health are critical to the overall quality of life in rural America.

We are told that up to 80 percent of most repetitive jobs might

be mechanized and that agriculture will simply replace our workers with machines. Although we can continue to improve productivity in agriculture, much of the work in your orchards is not able to be fully mechanized. For you, mechanization means moving platforms and other aids avoid climbing and save steps. It still takes human workers to produce fruit. We can increase safety and productivity, but we still need workers to produce apples and other labor intensive crops that sustain the food security of our country.

Because there is no longer a large enough pool of American workers available for orchard and other seasonal work; we are reliant on foreign labor. Our production uses 80 percent or more foreign labor. Our

action, or inaction on immigration, will decide whether that labor works inside America, or in another country. Apples will be produced somewhere, it is in America's best interest to provide enough legal workers to produce them here.

The Trump administration has promised business relief but the talk of border walls, employer sanctions, and more immigration enforcement has frightened and disrupted both employers and employees. There is concern that the migrant workers may not travel this year out of fear of aggressive enforcement. It is easy to argue that these fears are not rational if workers are legally present, but they are real fears nonetheless. Neither the Secretary of Agriculture nor the Secretary of Labor are yet seated so we face the 2017 season with large numbers of decision makers unnamed. It may be difficult to get timely answers and decisions in-season.

We hope Congress and the Administration will truly engage in the issue of agricultural labor need and supply. We need proper and legal means to retain our entire current workforce and a fully functioning, flexible, and market based legal guest worker, program that would satisfy the needs of both seasonal and year-around agriculture.

Your associations continue working

together with Congress and the Administration. The Agriculture Workforce Coalition (AWC), meets regularly with Congress and the Administration to work toward the common goals of stabilizing our current workforce so that we can continue to employ them legally. We are advocating for short-term improvements in the only legal agricultural worker visa program (H-2A), and for the longer-term implementation of a new guest worker program based on free-market principles that meets the needs of our diverse industry for a legal workforce. If you would like to learn more about the work of the AWC, including who participates in it, see the website <http://www.agworkforcecoalition.org/>.

Please continue to support your associations both financially and with your political activism. Without you, we cannot hope to get improved government action.

Frank Gasperini has served as President & CEO of the National Council of Agricultural Employers (NCAE) located in Washington, DC since 2008. NCAE is the national trade association representing over 250 labor intensive agricultural employers from over 35 states in Washington, DC.. Visit NCAE's for more information: www.NCAEonline.org or call Frank at 202-629-9320