

WASHINGTON STATE FARMERS SUFFERING LOSSES OWING TO DIRE LABOR SHORTAGE



Asparagus growing Farmers in Washington State are facing a dire paucity of workers that is preventing them from cashing in on the increasing demand for their crop. Dan Fazio of the Washington Farm Labor Association said, "We have a labor shortage, pure and simple." Farmers are having no option but to leave 10 percent of the year's crop uncut as there aren't enough hands to do the job. The state's asparagus commissioner pegs the resultant loss to the farmers at a combined \$200,000 each day. The jobless rate in Franklin County, which accounts for most of the crop produced by the region, is 10.7 percent, Ironically, even though there are many people queuing up at the unemployment office, the farmers are not recruiting from there. Alan Schreiber statement reflects that the locals are not fit for the job says that harvesting asparagus is hard work and you've got to be productive. "I'm pretty confident that if the average unemployed citizen in Franklin County came out and cut asparagus, it would be an unmitigated disaster," he said. Jim Middleton of Midd Farms in Franklin County said that he will not harvest the crop in 15 of his 130 acres, as there aren't enough workers. Having enough workers is essential because if asparagus isn't cut for a few days, it gets too tall to be marketable. You can't miss a couple of days," he said Asparagus growers says that the solution to this problem lies in reforming immigration laws that would permit, illegal immigrants to remain in the country and work their way to legal status. However, opponents of illegal immigrants say that the farmers themselves are to blame for the predicament they find themselves in. It's not that the locals cannot do this work, they allege, it is because the farmers do not want to pay higher wages that are acceptable to native born workers. Their continued dependence on immigrant labor is because it is cheap and willing to be flexible in accepting employer terms. Eric Ruark of FAIR, Federation of Americans for Immigration Reform says, "For some reason agri-business seems to think they're exempt from paying a living wage or from providing suitable conditions for workers and they think that because they've been able to get away with it." Others feel that the state lawmakers' liberal unemployment benefits policy has greatly contributed to the farm worker labor shortage. Unemployed people in Washington may get unemployment benefits up to \$583 a week for 73 weeks. That's almost half of what they would get each week, if they were employed. Erin Shannon of the Washington Policy Center says, "The state has created a disincentive to work with our generous benefits, with the weekly maximum and the duration of benefits." Dan Fazio, who represents growers across the state, refuting charges by employment officials that agri-business isn't trying hard at all, says that farm owners have been trying to entice workers to come and work in the fields and have placed more than 2,000 advertisements under state employment listings, asking for farm workers. However, says Fazio, "the vast majority of those go unfilled." Growers say that it is an extremely competitive market and that paying more for labor would make them lose market share to foreign market share in Peru and Mexico. "We're competing in a global marketplace," says Alan Schreiber. "We're competing against Peru, where they pay \$5 a day, and Mexico, where they pay \$10 a day." Farm owner Gary Larsen says, here farmers have to guarantee workers will earn at least the state's minimum wage of \$9.04 per hour. The Washington crop, only California grows more, is valued at \$23 million. Last year imports from Peru totaled \$161 million, whereas \$146 million worth of asparagus was imported from Mexico.

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