

FARMERS ADVOCATE CHANGE IN IMMIGRATION LAWS TO ADDRESS ACUTE WORKER SHORTAGE



Farmers in California have warned of a severe shortage of labourers unless a system is put into practice wherein, the government permits farm pickers into the country, legally, only for the duration that they are required. Kevin Andrew, a farmer said, "You'd think agriculture would have Republican politicians on our side, but on this issue we don't." At the moment there are a few labourers, but many more will be needed, when it's time to harvest the fruit, he says. The problem of impending labour shortage, as he sees it, is compounded by tight border security and a Mexican economy on the rise, owing to which labourers find work there and are reluctant to cross over to this side of the border. The solution is temporary status for these workers, but the GOP congressional reps inflexibly remain opposed to giving them temporary legalized status and coming-and-going privileges for undocumented farm workers. "My older brother in Atlanta says I'm part of the problem for hiring these guys," said Andrew. "And I say, 'Well, who's mowing your lawn, and when you go to Vegas, who's cleaning your hotel room?' We know we're using undocumented workers, and we would love to have a program where we're not doing that." Farmers have always wanted migrant workers, who have the skill, strength and stamina and are willing to do hard labor for minimum wages. Fear of acute shortage of labourers and the resultant loss to farmers has seen aides to former Presidents Nixon and Reagan, lobbying to allow illegal immigrants, now working under the shadow of secrecy, to come out of their camouflage and work openly. Ken Khachigian, a GOP consultant and former speechwriter for Nixon and Reagan, in a recent commentary, published in Wall Street Journal asked why Congress bent over backward to streamline a guest worker program for foreign athletes, but refuses to make life easier for farm workers. Many people say that if the farmers are paid well, there would be no labor shortage. However, growers argue that the harvest times are irregular and depend on the vagaries of weather and other factors. Since labourers are constantly on the move, it may become difficult to find them when you need them. Federal raids were another impediment, as 60 to 80 percent of the workers were undocumented and likely to be taken to prison, if the E-Verify program was implemented by the investigating officers, to check their citizen status. David, a 53 year old undocumented worker lamented that he hadn't been to Mexico, for the last six years, where he had a wife and a ten year old son. He said that he was afraid to go, as he did not have the appropriate papers and the borders were not safe for crossing. Moreover, he said, that he learnt that if he had to bribe his way through he would have to pay almost 25 percent of his yearly earnings. Farmers in Delano, Selma and Bakersfield said that, despite high unemployment across California it was well nigh impossible to employ local native-born workforce. Moreover, the younger generation of migrant farm workers, were not as keen to work on the farms and with the aging workforce, the problem unless addressed would continue to become more and more acute. A Bakersfield grower had told a labor contractor to provide him with 400 workers at \$3 above the going rate. However, he was not able to get the desired number of labourers. Kevin Andrew said, when you call up a labor contractor and ask him for 40 labourers, only half that number will show up, the following day. "They always say yes, but then you'll have maybe 17, 18 workers show up." Representatives of the farms regularly visit Washington to plead with the lawmakers for immigration reform, but to no avail. This year in the election year, chances of such a law being passed are virtually nil. Farmers have resigned themselves to the fact that they will have to leave some of their crop unharvested, leading to shortage and higher prices for consumers. Surveys have indicated that most Americans would be in favour of a guest worker program, but the Republicans staunchly oppose that, fearing that the Democrats may offer the guest workers a chance to apply for permanent residency. US Senator Dianne Feinstein of California had started a "blue card" proposal, calling for a five-year guest worker program, but it failed to take off. "I have tried for 10 years now to pass a bill called AgJobs ... and it's been one frustration after another," she said The current immigration system is full of holes and barefaced hypocrisies. There are thousands of undocumented workers, working in the US. Farms across the country. Its time this problem was addressed with the seriousness and farsightedness that it merits.