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FARM LABOR CRISIS

While Lawmakers Quibble, U.S. Market Share, Food Security Slip Away

A recent study by Dr. Phillip Martin, University of California-Davis, takes a superficial look at farm labor and draws similarly superficial and complacent conclusions. Yet, immigration restrictionists including the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) are touting the flawed analysis as an excuse for continued Congressional inaction.

The CIS-touted analysis has been critiqued by nationally renowned agricultural economist Dr. James S. Holt. Holt points out the flaws in the Martin study, which looks at the U.S. farm labor situation in isolation, as if forces such as global competition did not exist.

Those living in the real world of agriculture know well the bite of the labor crisis. The worst impacts have been felt first-hand, for instance, by a South Texas grower who lost \$250,000 in income when a 35 acre cabbage field had to be abandoned; by northern California pear growers who lost a quarter of their crop in 2006, and by Michigan asparagus farmers who abandoned one million pounds of high-value asparagus this past Spring for lack of harvesters.

Yet, many impacts of the current farm labor crisis are more insidious. Production of labor-intensive crops and livestock in the U.S. is performed by a labor force of which a significant majority lacks proper immigration status. Unless Congress acts to address the crisis in a timely manner, America faces a steady loss of control of our food supply as imports increase and American market share declines. U.S. producers must struggle to use a limited and unresponsive temporary worker program known as H-2A, or risking devastating consequences if targeted for raids.

The Martin study does offer one accurate, albeit long-term, recommendation: that the government has an important role to play facilitating mechanization. Mechanization and other labor-productivity-enhancing measures do have a role to play in upgrading the quality and safety of farm jobs and, to a lesser extent, replacing needed labor. The "easy work" regarding mechanization has been done. Commodities like fruits and most vegetables cannot be completely mechanized at least at a cost that would allow competitive production to remain in America. Even in the dairy industry, while milking has been substantially automated, there is a substantial need for skilled farm labor.

While mechanization research and development is an important area for public-private partnerships, it is long-term, expensive, and highly crop- or production system-specific. It is not a near-term solution to the real crisis at hand. However, solutions are within reach. Congress should finally act to pass the bipartisan Agricultural Job Opportunity, Benefits, and Security Act of 2007, or AgJOBS.

The Agriculture Coalition for Immigration Reform (ACIR) is the broad national coalition representing over 300 national, regional, and state organizations whose members produce fruit and vegetables, dairy, nursery and greenhouse crops, poultry, livestock, and Christmas trees.