Dwindling work force puts pressure on California growers

by Leslie Berestein and Diane Lin

CALEXICO, Calif. - In the pre-dawn hours during the harvest season in the Imperial Valley, a parking lot abutting the border fence buzzes with activity.

Diesel exhaust and the hum of engines fill the air as hundreds of buses idle in the dark, surrounded by farm workers waiting to be hired by labor contractors. Many are legal border crossers who have commuted from neighboring Mexicali, some rising before 2 a.m.

Workers huddle outside the buses, sipping hot coffee to ward off the early-morning chill. Some of those already recruited stretch out on the seats, trying to catch a bit more sleep. By 5 a.m., the buses will start rumbling toward the fields, some as far away as Yuma and the Coachella Valley.

Although thousands show up to find work, some days it isn't enough. Some crews won't be full, especially at the harvest's peak in midwinter.

As on-and-off talk of a guest-worker program continues in Washington, this parking lot is the Southern California epicenter in the debate.

FARM WORKERS - Jose Moreno, a foreman with El Don Farm Labor Contracting, said workers often abandon farms after a season and find other work. â€œWeâ€™re short on people.' Moreno said. CNS Photo by Laura Embry.

"We're short on people," said Jose Moreno, a foreman with El Don Farm Labor Contracting, as he waited for enough workers to make up 10 lettuce and broccoli crews one morning at the end of lettuce season in the spring. "I used to say, 'I don't have work.' Now I say, 'Do you want to work?'â€š"

The agricultural industry continues to pressure legislators for a guest-worker plan to be included in any immigration overhaul.

Being considered is a proposal that would admit up to 200,000 guest workers per year to work two-year increments in nonspecific industries, which could include agriculture.

In addition, Sens. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., and Larry Craig, R-Idaho, are promoting a bill known as AgJobs as part of the package, which would grant legal status to undocumented farm workers who have worked a required period of time.

The bill would also streamline the existing H-2A seasonal farm worker visa program to make it easier for growers to hire guest workers, although it would not increase their ranks.

With passage of a broader package uncertain, both senators have suggested they would pursue a separate agriculture bill if an agreement can't be reached.

"The intent of the agriculture industry is to hold them to that promise," said Bob Vice, a longtime guest-worker advocate and Fallbrook, Calif., avocado grower. "Without some kind of guest-worker program, perishable agriculture as it is known today is not going to survive in this country ... people are not raising their children to be farm workers."

However, others say, a persistent farm labor shortage is hard to define. The supply of farm workers is directly tied to what growers are willing to pay, said Philip Martin, a University of California Davis economist. In California, the average farm worker earns less than $10 an hour.

"We want to make workers available so that it's easy for employers to hire them, so we don't lose any economic output," Martin said. "At the same time, we want high wages for U.S. workers. You have to decide to which one of those to give the higher priority."

IN THE VALLEY

In the Imperial Valley, where most of the nation's lettuce is grown, growers and labor contractors have for several years complained about a labor shortage. They say their work force is aging, with younger prospects eschewing the backbreaking work for jobs in construction, the valley's burgeoning service sector or Mexicali's maquiladoras.

Ken Peterson, president of Black Dog Farms, said he had to leave 20 acres of leaf lettuce to wither in the field in December because he couldn't get enough workers to pick it.

"This was the first time we've ever left product in the field in a high market," he said. "You couldn't get crews. We lost about $70,000 on that field alone."

Among the mix of workers waiting for their buses to leave the parking lot, including women, there is a preponderance of older men.

"The younger men with micas (border crossing cards), the ones who work in construction, they are crossing the border in their work trucks at 6 or 7 a.m.," said Edmundo Vega, 62, a longtime farm worker from Mexicali who had been waiting in the lot since long before dawn.

During the past several years, less grueling job opportunities have opened up north and south of the border. There is a growing manufacturing base in Mexicali, and for those who can cross legally - including those who carry border-crossing cards but work without permits, a common practice - the Imperial Valley is rapidly developing.

"Most of these workers have been working for 10 years or more," said Moreno, the foreman, as farm workers climbed onto his bus. "The new ones don't want this work. They stay just one season and I don't see them anymore. They take other jobs, in construction or in hotels."

Aside from job competition, growers say, stepped-up immigration enforcement is a contributing factor. The Imperial Valley's farm industry is an anomaly in that, while there are exceptions, much of its work force is in the country legally.

According to the Pew Hispanic Center in Washington, D.C., only 4 percent of the nation's unauthorized workers are employed in agriculture, but they make up the vast majority of farm labor. It is estimated that as many as 90 percent of California's farm workers are foreign born, most of them here illegally.

The federal government has recently revived its focus on interior enforcement, including employers who hire illegally. For growers, this - along with tighter border security, which may deter some newcomers - is one incentive to secure guest workers.

For some migrant workers, it has meant finding another job, preferably one that pays well enough to offset the steep costs paid to smugglers, and one that lets them lie low in one place.

THE SENATE PLAN

Under the Senate's guest-worker proposal, employers could recruit foreign workers under a new "Y-1" visa program after advertising vacant jobs for 90 days, paying fees and meeting various conditions.

This new program would exist in addition to the current H-2 guest-worker programs for seasonal farm and nonfarm workers, and would entitle guest workers to the same wages and benefits as similar U.S. workers, including the ability to switch jobs. However, H-2 workers in seasonal jobs would continue to be tied to one employer, a restriction that has drawn criticism as an incentive for exploitation.

There are no numerical caps on the current H-2A program used for farm workers, but it is seldom used in the West. Growers complain about having too many administrative hoops to jump through and having to provide housing, which must meet certain standards. Under the more employer-friendly Senate plan, growers could simply provide a housing allowance.

Still, some question the need for a guest-worker program. With fewer new farm workers, wages would ultimately rise said Martin, an expert on immigration and labor issues. This could increase the supply of workers, drawing them out of other industries, he said, or more likely prompt farmers to take cost-cutting measures such as mechanizing or changing to less labor-intensive crops.

"I'm looking at a cabbage machine for $350,000," said grower Jack Vessey, co-owner of Vessey & Co. Inc.

HIGH UNEMPLOYMENT RATE

Despite the alternative job opportunities development has brought to the valley, Imperial County still has the highest unemployment rate in California, 16.2 percent for May. It's a problem that growers lobbying for guest workers have run into when making their argument.

"The conflict always was, well, if it is so hard to get workers and you have to import all these workers from Mexico, why is the unemployment rate so high?" said economist James Gerber, director of the Center for Latin American Studies at San Diego State University.

The cross-border nature of the work force is one reason. One study roughly estimates that as much as 40 percent of the county's overall work force commutes from Mexicali, said Gerry Schmaedick, an economist at the Yuma campus of Northern Arizona University.

Anyone who works legally in the United States may apply for unemployment. However, workers who commute from Mexico don't show up in census data, skewing the statistics. Schmaedick estimates that because of this and other factors, the county's true unemployment rate could range five to nine percentage

points below the state estimate.

Another problem is unemployment fraud, a widespread practice among farm workers that growers and labor contractors are well aware of. In 2006, there were an average of 12,100 farm jobs in the county, 21 percent of the job total for all industries countywide.

"These people have to make so much money to live on," said Andrew Currier, a grower and co-owner of El Don. "We only want to pay them so much. They can't live on what we are paying. But if they can do it collecting unemployment on one or two Social Security cards, it is a government subsidy ... if we paid them more, there would probably be less unemployment fraud."

Farm work does dry up in Calexico when the winter harvest season ends. A few find work harvesting melons and other off-season crops, but there isn't enough for everybody.

That spring morning at the end of lettuce season, a few dozen workers who didn't get on a crew headed for the Frosty Donuts shop a few blocks from the border, where they socialized on the sidewalk outside before calling it quits.

Maria Rico of Calexico, 50, said things would be different if it were peak harvest time, when contractors scramble for workers.

"In the high season, there is lots of work," she said. "In January, there isn't anyone left."

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