



UPDATE

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Immigration Reform: Implications for Agriculture

by

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About half of U.S. farm workers are not authorized to work in the United States. Pending immigration reforms aim to prevent the entry and employment of more unauthorized foreigners, but differ on what to do about unauthorized workers already in the United States.

About 95,000 foreigners a day arrive in the United States. About 90,000 are nonimmigrant tourists, business people, and foreign students and workers welcomed at airports and border crossings. About 3,000 are immigrants who have been invited to become permanent residents of the United States, and almost 2,000 are unauthorized foreigners, usually Mexicans, who evade border controls, enter the United States, and settle.

Is the arrival of 30 million nonimmigrants, a million immigrants, and 500,000 to 700,000 unauthorized foreigners a year something to be welcomed or feared?

Opinion polls consistently find that most Americans want the U.S. government to take additional steps to prevent illegal migration. A December 2005 *Washington Post-ABC News* poll reported that 80 percent of Americans think the federal government should do more to reduce illegal immigration, and 56 percent agree that unauthorized migrants hurt the United States more than they help it.

In December 2005, the House approved the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act (H.R. 4437) on a 239 to 182 vote. President Bush commended the bill, saying: "I applaud the House for passing a strong immigration reform bill... I urge the Senate to take action on immigration reform so that I can sign a good bill into law."

If eventually enacted into law, H.R. 4437 would require U.S. employers within two years to submit Social Security and other data on newly hired workers to government agencies by telephone or computer. If the data do not match that in government records, employers are to notify workers to correct the problem within 30 days, or the worker could no longer be employed. Employers would have six years to verify the legal status of their current employees. H.R. 4437 also cracks down on unauthorized foreigners in the United States by making "illegal presence" in the United States a felony, which may make it hard for such persons to eventually become legal immigrants, and introduces penalties on those who support or shield illegal migrants, which could affect churches and other migrant support groups.

Perhaps the most controversial item in H.R. 4437 is a provision that calls for 700 miles of additional fencing along the Mexico-U.S. border. Adding to the 106 miles already in place, this would extend the fencing to over a third of the 2,000 mile border. Even though President Bush has been calling for a guest-worker program since his election in 2000, H.R. 4437 does not include such a program.

In March 2006, the Senate began to take up immigration reform. Unlike the House, the leading proposals in the Senate would legalize unauthorized foreigners

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