

perspective

The fruit of our labor

America's broken immigration system is creating a crunch on Colorado farms, which depend on seasonal workers during harvest

By Robert T. Sakata

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This time of year, seven days a week, I am out in the fields an hour before sunrise, getting things ready for harvest, and I usually get home an hour after sunset. We started planting our sweet corn on April Fool's Day, and it's taken a lot of hard work and faith to get us to harvest.

This year, we started harvesting sweet corn on July 23; if we don't get an early frost, we hope to finish by Sept. 14. That's 54 days of controlled chaos. For 54 days, we are hoping to sell enough sweet corn to cover all of our expenses for the year like fuel, electricity, seed, fertilizer and labor.

We have only 54 days to see if we can keep farming for another year.

Most people think of their yearly income based on 365 days. For me, it's those 54 days. In vegetable farming, we don't get a paycheck until the crops we grow are sold and we get paid for them.

Behind the scenes on our family farm in Brighton, more than 200 dedicated employees understand that our work schedule this time of year isn't controlled by a time clock but instead by the ripeness of the crop and the whims of Mother Nature. They understand that for 54 days, everybody works hard and then can hopefully share in the fruits of their labor.

From a vegetable farmer's perspective, we are blessed here in Colorado with wonderfully warm summers and cold winters. The winters provide us with 90 percent of our summertime water needs, and the sub-freezing temperatures are nature's way of killing the bugs and plant diseases. But this blessing is also a challenge: Except for these 54 days of harvest, we don't have enough work to keep those 200 people employed year-round, so much of our work is seasonal.

Growing up on the farm, I remember that we hired a lot of high school and college students. My father has always been proud that some of those kids have gone on to do great things. I remember that he once told me, "It's not how far up the ladder of success you climb, but how many people have climbed it with you." Many of our former employees have come back to thank my parents for providing them with the opportunity to learn about hard work, dedication, deferred gratification and the determination it took to make it through those 54 days.

But that trend is changing. This year, we don't have any college students working with us. High school students are going back to school earlier and there are so many more activities in the summer that take precedence over work. Plus, new laws and regulations restrict what work can be done by

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anybody under 18.

We have found ourselves depending more and more on seasonal help from other sources. For reasons that I would agree with, the United States is cracking down on illegal immigrants. However, the government has not created a process that allows for the flow of a legal seasonal workforce that can follow the pattern of crop production.

Unlike most businesses, which deal with employee verification only on a limited basis (as normal staff turnover occurs), small farms like ours have to hire a temporary work force every year. The government certainly could help matters along by coming up with a tamper-proof identification. Each year, we face complicated government paperwork for each of our seasonal employees, and realize that the ramifications of letting an error slip through are serious.

Beginning last year, we have found it extremely difficult to find enough skilled seasonal employees. For the first time ever, we have tried to recruit help through job services, local radio stations and newspapers, with little success. Would you be willing to give up your job for one that will last only two months?

Last year it was so bad that we lost some of our crop because we just didn't have enough help. What should have been 54 days of controlled chaos turned into 54 days of torture as we helplessly watched some of our future simply rot away in the field.

This year, we tried the government's H-2A program. According to the Department of Labor, "The H-2A

temporary agricultural program establishes a means for agricultural employers who anticipate a shortage of domestic workers to bring nonimmigrant foreign workers to the U.S. to perform agricultural labor or services of a temporary or seasonal nature."

But the bureaucracy that has developed from this program no longer takes into account the main reason that it was initially set up: the critical seasonal and timely nature required in farming. The program utterly failed us, and we would have found ourselves in the same dire situation as last year, but hail storms that destroyed a large portion of our broccoli and onion crops reduced our demand for workers.

I just don't know what we'll do next year, because for us, the seasonal labor crisis is here now - and very real.

The United States must develop a reasonable seasonal labor program. Otherwise, we may soon find ourselves depending on other countries for fresh fruits and vegetables.

Over time, we have placed an unreasonable burden on less than 2 percent of the nation's population by asking the American farmer to feed and clothe more people with ever-increasing regulatory burdens. Perhaps we could pass legislation that would make the other 98 percent of the population be required to work on a farm for 54 days to help produce the food and fiber that their families will require.

Remember last winter, when Front Range residents panicked because they couldn't find any food for their Christmas dinners because of the blizzard? We

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take our food supply for granted. We have the luxury to be able to look for what we desire rather than just what we need to survive. Most people no longer know where their food comes from, or what it takes to grow it.

The 2 percent of the population that deals with the 54 days of controlled chaos and the labor it takes to bring that food to your table must not be left out of the immigration debate ... or worse yet, forgotten.

Robert T. Sakata is part owner of Sakata Farms in Brighton.

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