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*How It
Helps
Our
Farming
Families*

should be expelled and banned from returning to the U.S.

But rather than address the issue with one extreme approach or another, let's look at this question: How do today's immigration policies affect our farmers and, in the end, all of us as consumers?

"The biggest problem with employing immigrants is verifying their status," says Rob Valicoff of Valicoff Fruit in Wapato. "We're

By Barbra Walk

Immigration reform is a hot-button issue, especially in states like ours. Everyone agrees that we need reform, but there are many differing ideas on how to get there.

On one side of the spectrum are those who believe that amnesty should be given to all unauthorized immigrants currently residing in the United States. On the other end are those who believe that these folks are illegal aliens who

required to have an I-9 form for every employee. However, we're not given the tools to verify that social security numbers are legitimate."

According to the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF), this puts American farmers and ranchers into a "Catch 22" position. It is illegal to "knowingly" employ someone who is not authorized to work in the U.S., but an employer must accept any document that appears genuine.

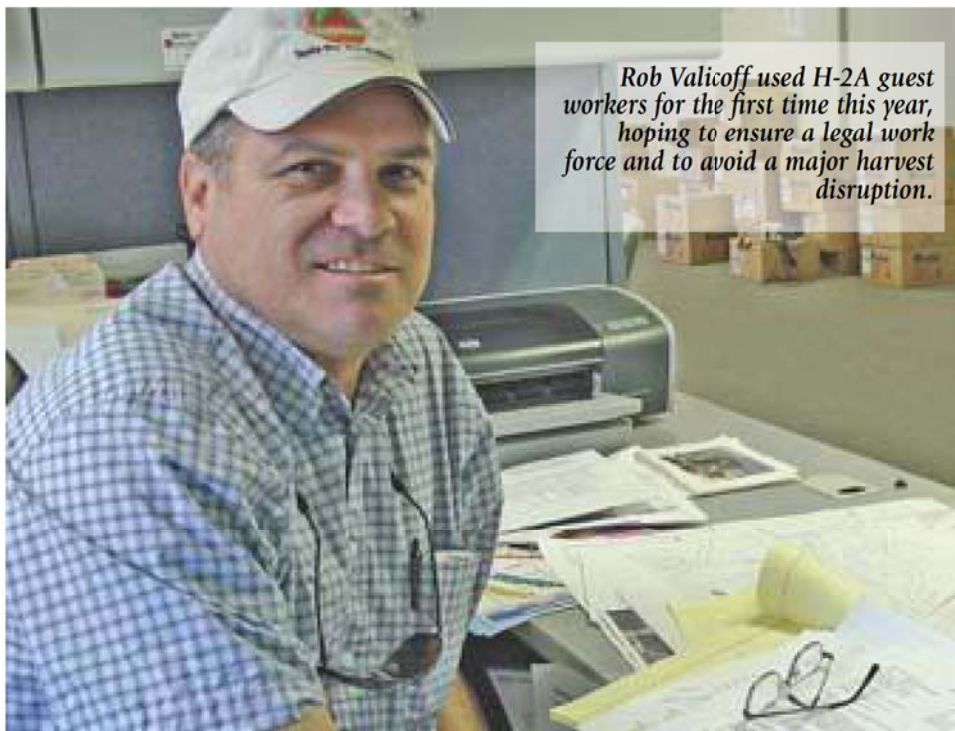
If an employer accepts the documents at face value and they are later found to be false, then that employer can be prosecuted. However, if an employer asks for further documentation, then he or she can be subject to a lawsuit for unlawful discrimination.

"We need the ability to verify employment eligibility," says Valicoff.

Currently, AFBF and WFB are working for immigration reform.

One AFBF proposal supports "strengthening the current system for verifying the status of workers so that the process is simple, conclusive, reliable, timely and provides a safe harbor for employers acting in good faith."

Implementation of this proposal would be welcomed by today's agricultural families.



Rob Valicoff used H-2A guest workers for the first time this year, hoping to ensure a legal work force and to avoid a major harvest disruption.

Another way to improve our immigration labor situation is improving the temporary guest worker programs.

The H-2A (agriculture) and H-2B (non-agriculture) programs enable U.S. employers to recruit seasonal workers from abroad on a temporary work visa. Valicoff Fruits has participated in the H-2A program for four years. In 2007, they began participating in the H-2B program when Valicoff's commercial packing warehouse made the company eligible.

The H-2A program is quite expensive, not only because employers are required to offer free housing and transportation (to and from the worker's home country), but also because the wages they pay are frequently above market levels.

"People have the impression that immigrant workers are 'paid under the table', but that's just not true," says Rob. "We pay our employees a more-than-fair rate, as well as provide their basic needs. As a matter of fact, we're going to build on-site housing for our employees."

In order to meet his harvesting needs, Rob must employ foreign labor.

"There aren't enough U.S. workers for picking and packing our fruit. Over the years, we've built a strong labor force with returning immigrants. Using the same people every year has decreased our training costs. However, the guest worker program needs to be revisited and modified."

Rob believes that the two strongest solutions for immigration reform are 1) employers' ability to verify employee status, and 2) a transition period for current illegal immigrants to work toward citizenship.

AFBF strongly supports reform of the H-2A program so that it:

- Allows employers to pay workers a prevailing, market-based wage;
- Accommodates the needs of modern agriculture whose labor needs have changed since the inception of the program;
- Eliminates unnecessary bureaucracy and red tape so it is more responsive and timely to growers' needs.

Immigration reform won't be easy. However, with strong leaders and an understanding of how these reforms will affect our farmers, change that will help everyone is possible.

From the farmer down to the consumer, this is an important issue. Hopefully, our leaders will find a compromise that will benefit everyone.

This may well be the tipping point for reforms to be made.

Rob believes that we need to invest in labor. "It's the largest portion of my budget," he states.

Labor costs can be as much as 70 percent of the total costs of a typical grower, when packing costs charged by the processor are included.

"Without the labor, there is no harvest. And without the harvest, Americans will be forced to buy their food from foreign markets," warns Rob.

Farmers like Rob Valicoff are struggling to compete against nations like China, where the average labor cost is less than one-tenth of the cost in the United States. There are fewer controls on food safety, and the quality is generally much lower outside the U.S.

"Let's spend the money here in the U.S. on the reforms that are needed. If you want an American product, then you'll have to pay for it," Rob declares. "And you can quote me on that!"

WFB's Dan Fazio provides farm managers with in depth training about how to properly complete I-9 forms.

In 2009, Representative Bruce Chandler (R-Granger) worked with the Washington Farm Bureau to introduce legislation wherein the state would formally adopt an essential worker pilot program. The



essential worker pilot would allow growers to pay a fee to the state, and in return the state would work with other nations to recruit "essential workers" for the agricultural industry. Although the legislation has not yet passed, the Washington Department of Agriculture and the House of Representatives have formed a task force to study the issue this summer.



About Valicoff

Valicoff Gardens was established in 1921 and was well-known for its dill pickles and fresh vegetables. In 1977, they established Valicoff Fruit Company which today offers seven varieties of apples, as well as peaches, pears, nectarines and apricots.

For more information, visit their website at www.applesonline.com.

