

Proponents of immigrant workers want reform

Some say current system punishes workers who come to U.S. legally

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Legislation is unlikely to move quickly enough in 2008 to help landscaping companies and other employers who depend on workers from outside the United States.

For the Illinois Green Industry Association and the American Nursery and Landscape Association, the larger hope is for long-term reform in policies affecting immigration and the employment of legal foreign workers.

"There are 12 1/2 million illegal aliens in the United States," said Dave Bender, executive director of the IGIA. "We don't know who they are or where they are."

Some estimates indicate that in jobs outside the H-2B program's realm, such as agricultural planters, pickers and milkers, as much as three-quarters of the work force is unauthorized.

Bender and Craig Regelbrugge, vice president for government relations and research, also bristle at criticism that American companies' use of H-2B and other programs for foreign workers takes jobs and higher wages away from U.S. workers.

"If the seasonal workers aren't here, it puts in jeopardy the jobs of the Americans who are in year-round positions as supervisors and managers, and even owners and designers and people in sales and everything else," Regelbrugge said. "If you can't do the production, which is inherently seasonal because Mother Nature made it that way, you can't sustain a company and sustain American jobs."

"There have been extensive efforts in various parts of the country to recruit domestic workers. The work is tough, it's seasonal, it's intermittent. Americans will choose to get a full-time job in Wal-Mart or McDonald's at a lower hourly wage because of the stability and the nature of the work. These things are structural realities. Either we'll figure them out as a country or we'll see our economy decline as a result, and we'll see Americans' well-being decline."

Dale Stuber, owner of Stuber Land Design in Tremont, is the descendant of immigrants from Germany and Yugoslavia. Stuber believes in H-2B because of the accountability it provides. Workers are fingerprinted, interviewed and documented at the border, and they pay taxes on their earnings.

But there are only 66,000 of them, to which Stuber said: "Add at least one zero behind that. I'm serious. You would maybe then start to ease the demand that some unscrupulous employers would have for illegal workers."

Stuber, who has five H-2B workers from Mexico, views the millions of illegal workers as a drain on American taxpayers.

"We've got a lot of illegals coming over, and they're sucking our economy," Stuber said. "I don't understand why we give them certain benefits and rights when they're illegal in the first place, but we do. That costs us a lot of money. Here we've got guys in H-2B that come across, pay all their taxes, don't suck off any of our welfare system, obey the law and are well-tracked."

In many ways, he believes those who enter the country legally are at a disadvantage.

Past efforts to hire an H-2B worker's wife, or to gain U.S. citizenship for another employee, were rebuffed because H-2B is not considered a path to citizenship.

"He would have to go back to Mexico, give up his job that he currently has and wait for the process to happen in Mexico," Stuber said. "It could take anywhere from seven to 21 years, we were told. Is that worth it to him? No. By that time, his family would be raised. He wants to have his family together now, not in 21 years."

"It's not at all being used as a gateway to citizenship. I think that is wrong. These are the type of immigrant workers you would want as citizens."

Bender agrees that the current system for foreign workers "absolutely does punish those who come here within the means of the law."

Even for those who are not seeking citizenship, legal work programs can seem daunting enough that many will look for shortcuts.

"If we would take all the billions we spend on free handouts that we give to illegal workers and utilize just a fraction of that money toward expanding the legal programs we have, a lot of those illegal workers would choose not to be illegal," Stuber said. "They'd go through the system. Why wouldn't they? Who wants to be an illegal person, never knowing if you'd be stopped by a cop and sent back to Mexico? Why wouldn't they want to be legal, if the process was reasonable?"