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Farm Bureau to push for 'essential workers' program

By Diane Urbani de la Paz
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PORT ANGELES - Merrill & Ring, owner of 60,000 acres of forest across Western Washington, cannot find enough native-born people to work in its woods, said Norm Schaaf, the company's Port Angeles-based vice president.

"We contract with a number of companies," he said. "They hire the crews," of primarily Mexican migrant workers.

The companies ensure that the migrants have the documents necessary for legal entry, Schaaf added.

One contractor is Raul Mendoza, whose Northwest Thinning firm brings in forest workers with H2B visas that allow them to come into the country for a limited time.

"They come up in vans from Arizona," Mendoza said. "Nobody else wants to do the work. Even Mexicans, once they're legal [immigrants], don't want to do this work."

Planting and thinning trees, slash-burning and brush-cutting are "pretty hard," he said, in the cold, wet woods of the West End.

It's clear, however, that the foreign workers and the Forks-area employers depend on each other for their livelihoods.

To obtain H2B visas - temporary work permits for people in the forestry, seafood processing, landscaping and tourism industries - an employer must first apply for certification from the U.S. Department of Labor.

After showing Labor that there aren't enough U.S. workers qualified to fill the vacant jobs, the employer may petition the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service for H2B visas.

The petition fee is \$320 per worker, said Marie Sebrechts, spokesperson for the service. The employer must also define the length of time for which the H2B workers are needed.

"Anybody who comes in on [an H2B] visa has no path toward immigration whatsoever," Sebrechts added.

The federal government will issue up to 66,000 H2B visas this year, she said.

They'll go to seasonal workers who clean rooms in Colorado ski resorts, shuck oysters in Massachusetts and thin trees across the Pacific Northwest.

No protection

But the H2B system can lead to unjust exploitation, according to a 2007 report by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

"Guest workers do not enjoy the most fundamental protection of a competitive labor market -- the ability to change jobs if they are mistreated.

Instead, they are bound to the employers that 'import' them," the report said.

The Law Center quotes U.S. Sen. Charles Rangel, a Democrat from New York, calling the H2B program the closest thing he's seen to slavery.

And Dan Fazio, director of employment services for the Washington Farm Bureau, wants something different: what he calls "a functioning guest worker program."

"We know jobs are the magnet for illegal immigration," Fazio said this week.

Wants pilot program

The farm bureau will push for an "essential worker" pilot program during the 2009 state legislative session.

The program would allow foreign workers to migrate more freely into Washington state and return to their countries of origin when the harvest is done.

"Look, Americans don't want a job for five or six months a year. But I'll tell you what," Fazio said, "people from other countries do."

"We need 50,000 seasonal workers to come and pick our crops," he said, adding that among Washington's 230 crops, two are "huge [and] labor-intensive: cherries and apples."

Fazio noted that the Evergreen State is No. 2 in the nation, after California, in the number of agricultural workers it needs.

Taken together, the seasonal and year-round jobs on Washington farms total 250,000.

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