

No Need for Illegal Workers

...to make sure we keep eating our vegetables

by Mark Krikorian

Illegal immigrants make up a significant portion of the work force in the production of fresh fruits and vegetables. Credible estimates, including the Labor Department's National Agricultural Workers Survey, put the figure at one quarter or less.

Whenever discussion focuses on controlling illegal immigration, as it is now in Congress and on the presidential campaign trail, people begin to ask: If we cut off the supply of illegal workers, how will we afford fresh produce? Won't tomatoes rival steak in price, and salad be reserved for the very rich?

Lobbyists for growers who use illegal immigrants are happy to hear these questions asked. If the public thinks the affordability of food depends on illegal immigrants working in the fields, it is less likely to support vigorous immigration law enforcement. Or, at the least, people will be

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sympathetic to calls for a guest-worker program, whereby foreign farm workers would be imported for seasonal work if the supply of illegal immigrants is cut off.

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Although the House recently voted down an amendment to its immigration bill that would have established a guest-worker program, the Senate is scheduled to debate its illegal immigration bill next week [mid-April] and may yet consider such a measure.

But is it true that illegal labor is needed to put food on our tables? Although some agricultural economists have come up with informal, back-of-the-envelope estimates on the impact on supermarket produce prices when illegal immigrants are barred from the agriculture industry, the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Immigration Studies recently released an analysis of this issue.

The study found that even a sudden transition to an all-legal non-guest-worker farm work force would be a non-event for consumers. Price increases would be small and shortlived — less than the seasonal fluctuations that occur naturally.

Specifically, price increases would depend on the season, according to the study's authors, economists Wallace Huffman and Alan McCunn of Iowa State University. During the summer and fall, when most fresh fruit and vegetables in the stores are domestically grown, prices would be about 6 percent higher for the first one or two years, and after that transitional period would level off at about 3 percent higher than what they would have been.

In the winter and spring, the initial impact would be under 4 percent, then settling to less than 2 percent. (At my supermarket in Manassas, Va., that would mean tomatoes would see an increase of 3 cents over this week's price of 78 cents per pound.)

Note that these modest price increases would be counter-cyclical — that is, they would be greatest when prices are naturally lower (summer and fall) and least when prices are naturally higher (winter and spring).

In any case, even these results are probably exaggerated.

In real life, illegal immigrants would not magically be removed all at once — their proportion of the agricultural work force would gradually decrease over a period of several years as law enforcement improved, allowing time for growers to adjust.

Nor would imports of fresh fruits and vegetables explode: the study found that they could be expected to increase by a mere 1 percent.

So who would pick the tomatoes? Despite the increase in wages that would result from cutting the supply of illegal workers, growers' spokesmen are correct in saying that unemployed Americans not already familiar with farm work are unlikely to be attracted.

Freshman economics tells us what would happen. First, growers would use the now-limited resource of labor more efficiently, in contrast to the notoriously wasteful practices they've grown accustomed to, thus drawing in many unemployed and under-employed farmworkers. In addition, growers would do what other businessmen do when faced with a finite supply of labor — mechanize.

If removing illegal workers from agriculture would have no discernible impact on consumers, and would not lead to a surge in imports, then what rationale is there for guest-worker program? The only remaining argument for such an arrangement is that it would help maintain the profit margins and market shares of certain American corporations by expanding the supply of farmworkers and thus keeping wages low. This may be reason

enough to institute what amounts to a new farm subsidy.

But whatever benefits might accrue to growers would have to be weighted against an unavoidable increase in illegal immigration; a reduction in the educational attainment of our work force; the retardation of technological development in agriculture; the deterioration of wages and working conditions in agriculture as more workers chase fewer jobs; and ever-higher social welfare expenditures for the throngs of idle farm workers.

Whatever decision Congress makes ought to be based on fact, not anecdote or supposition. And one prominent fact is that neither illegal immigrants nor guest-workers are needed to make sure we keep eating our vegetables.□