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IMMIGRATION REFORM AND THE FARM SECTOR

Immigration Policy Overview

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Late last month, President Bush signed a bill authorizing the construction of 700 miles of new fence along the U.S.-Mexico border in the government's effort to curb influx of illegal immigrants into the country. While the fence bill is considered an important step in the country's efforts to enforce border security, it is far from putting a definite closure on the whole immigration issue that has been hotly debated upon by the nation's legislators for months now. Some legislators are endorsing policies that are expected to have a significant effect, not only on the fate of immigrants that have been illegally residing and working in the country, but also on the economic viability of businesses that enjoyed cost savings from hiring these low-skilled labor at low wage rates. The farm industry has been pinpointed to be among those that have benefited from such conditions. Despite the increasing mechanization of most farm operations, some enterprises (such as those that operate or have shifted to the organic mode of production) that require more workers for manual work are most vulnerable under more radical immigration reform policies.

To recall how the immigration debate evolved, the U.S. House of Representatives voted in mid-September this year in favor of a bill that provides for the construction of a 700-mile fence along the US-Mexican border designed to keep illegal immigrants from entering the country (Gamboa, 2006). It also provides for stricter patrolling of the border by the Department of Homeland Security (Heneroty, 2006). This latest resolution from the House echoes its earlier recommendation passed in December last year that provided for the same border fence construction as well as the requirement for employers to verify the immigration status of their workers under which those found to be illegally staying in the country and their supporters (who provide aid) will be subjected to felony prosecution (Babington, 2006).



The Senate, however, came up with a more lenient approach to the immigration issue that calls for a construction of a shorter 371 mile triple-layer fence along the Mexican border, but established a "complicated three-tiered system for determining who, among those illegally staying in the country, can stay and who must leave the country (Babington, 2006). Specifically, this system is based on the immigrants' length of stay in the country where those that can prove that they have been here for five years and longer can apply for citizenship as long as they "pay back taxes, learn English and have no serious criminal records" (Babington, 2006). Those that have been in the country from two to five years will be asked to apply for a green card outside the U.S., which nonetheless would allow them to immediately return to the U.S. Those that have been in the U.S. illegally for less than two years will be automatically deported to their home country. This last provision is expected to affect 2 million out of the estimated total of 12 million illegal immigrants in the U.S. today. Nonetheless, the Senate's version of the bill would somehow allow majority of the illegal immigrants already in the country to remain and eventually earn U.S. citizenship. Moreover, the Senate resolution provides for some 200,000 new temporary guest-worker visas a year and creates a separate guest worker program for immigrant farm laborers.

As of this date, there has been no compromise between these two contrasting approaches taken by the House and the Senate towards the immigration issue. A spokesperson from the Senate has hinted on the postponement of the negotiations to reconcile the bills and instead focus on the establishment of firmer border security and stricter enforcement of worksite legislation (Heneroty, 2006).

Regardless of the outcome of the House-Senate discussions, the conditions in the farm labor market are expected to change radically. Any version of the Immigration Bill will affect an estimated 12 million unauthorized immigrants, 40% of whom are hired as farm workers (Seid, 2006; Levine, 2004). These illegal workers are mostly "poorly paid and poorly treated" (Smith, 2005) usually hired at wages below prevailing market rates. Their displacement under the House version of

the Immigration Bill will expectedly create labor shortages, which can be remedied if farm labor wages are increased significantly to attract workers from other industries. On the other hand, the legalization of the immigration status of most of these workers under the Senate version of the Bill will enhance their bargaining position to demand for better wages at or above prevailing market rates, in addition to the usual fringe benefits (insurance, bonuses and others) and better working conditions they are entitled to. An economist from the American Farm Bureau, for instance, estimates that the immigration reform can push farm wages from the current average of \$9.50 per hour to about \$14.50 an hour as farms are constrained to offer higher wage rates if only to attract the reluctant potential farm workers for hire (Seid, 2006). He foresees that the ultimate effect of all these immigration reforms is to raise commodity prices from 5% to 10% as farm businesses pass on the burden of higher labor costs to the consumers.

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Effects of the New Immigration Regulations on the Financial Conditions of the Fruit and Vegetable Industry

Esendugue Greg Fonsah, Assistant Professor

The new immigration reform or regulations concerning migrant labor is one of the burning issues on the agenda of most politicians. This regulation has created two schools of thought, those for it and those against it. Both schools have plausible reasons for their support or rejection of the policy. The policy impacts heavily on some sector of the U.S. economy, especially agriculture which is highly dependent on migrant labor than others. The objective of this article is to shed some light on the effect of the new immigration regulations and how it would impact the farm sector, especially the fruit and vegetable industry, if policy makers fail to implement regulations that would strike a balance in the migrant labor equation (AFBF, 2006; Levine 2006).

A Glance of the Fruit and Vegetable Industry

The United States Fruit and Vegetable Industry is one of the most dynamic in terms of growth and diversity. This industry is ranked 3rd in terms of U.S. crop cash receipts and 5th in terms of U.S. agricultural exports. This industry is so broad because of the number of commodities involved such as vegetables (broccoli, cabbage, tomatoes, onion, cucumbers, lettuce, snap beans, sweet corn, pepper, pumpkin, eggplant etc.) and fruits (oranges, apples, peaches, citrus, blueberries,



strawberries etc.), including tree nuts (pecans, macadamia, walnuts, pistachio etc.), pulse crops (field peas, lentils, field beans etc.) and melons (watermelon, cantaloupes, honeydews, etc.), produced in the United States (Lucier et al.; 2006).

Nationally, total vegetable import trade has been increasing significantly. The value of imported vegetables in 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2006 were \$5.4 billion, \$6.2 billion, \$6.6 billion and \$6.9 billion, respectively. The total import value of fresh vegetables, including melons, was \$3.9 billion in 2006 compared to \$3.0 billion in 2003. On the other hand, total fruit and vegetable export values generated were \$9.7 billion, \$10.9 billion and \$12.1 billion in 2003, 2004 and 2005 respectively. There was no change in the value of export trade in 2001 and 2002 as \$9.1 billion and \$9.2 billion were recorded respectively.

China has been a major competitor of the U.S. in these markets and a major threat to other major fruit and vegetable producing countries. For instance, China's fresh vegetable market share in the Japanese market escalated from 6% to 38% (fresh) and 53% (processed) from 1990-2001 whereas the share of the U.S. increased from 14% to only 19% (fresh) and 21% (processed) in the same time period. The U. S. is ranked third in vegetable production after China and India. Although ERS/USDA data show that China has been the leading producer of vegetables prior to 2000, almost 50% of the 2005 vegetable were produced in China. Number two ranked India only produced 9.2%, equivalent to 1,775 million cwt, while the U.S. produced 825 million cwt or barely 4.3% of the world production. China's production was 9,591 million cwt in 2005 (Huang, 2002).

Labor Situation Debate

Labor has always been an important issue in the U.S. agricultural sector for more than half a century. For instance, the Bracero program, initiated in 1942, allowed growers to bring in foreign labor into the U. S. on a temporary basis without changing their residency status and contributed in increasing farm labor supply. Similarly, the H-2A labor certification program, initiated in 1952, allowed growers to bring in foreign workers as long as similarly employed U.S workers were not displaced and no adverse effects on their wages and working conditions were experienced.

The recent broad-based guest worker program aimed at increasing the agricultural sector labor supply, however, has raised controversial views amongst government legislators in the Senate and the Congress. These discussions created the "for and against camps" in the immigration debate. The issues usually debated on concern:

1. "Whether there is an adequate supply of workers in the United States to fulfill the widely fluctuating labor requirements of some farmers; and
2. Whether the temporary admission of aliens to perform seasonal farm jobs adversely affects the labor market prospects of domestic workers" (Levine, 2006).

The "For Camp," which comprises mostly of growers of fresh fruits, vegetables and other horticultural crops, argue that during peak harvesting period for hand picked crops, such as pepper and tomatoes, there is not enough U.S. farm labor to do the job. As a result, bringing in foreign labor during such crucial time does not affect the U.S. farm labor pool because no competition exists. Furthermore, they claim that U.S. workers dread

the tediousness of harvesting operation in particular and farm work in general that even if farm wages are increased, they will still not accept to work simply because there are less tedious, more stable alternatives elsewhere where the work environments are more favorable and convenient. Consequently, growing the crops and not being able to harvest them would create a natural scarcity, which, in turn, would drive consumer prices up and render the country to be a net importer since the only source of fresh fruits, vegetables and specialty horticultural produce will be from "low-wage foreign competitors" (Levine, 2006).

On the other hand, the "Against Camp" claims that an increase in seasonal farm wages and better working conditions would encourage and attract U.S. workers to accept and/or stay on the job. They blame the guest worker programs (such as the Bracero and H-2A programs) for inserting a damp on the working conditions and wage levels of the U.S. workers due to the influx of additional foreign workers willing to accept lower wages. They claim that these programs are the reasons why new innovative technologies that would facilitate, improve working conditions and increase productivity of U.S. workers have not yet been developed. This group also claims that growers of fresh fruits, vegetables and specialty horticultural crops prefer foreign to U.S. workers simply because they are not protected by the same laws affecting U.S. workers, hence, they are not obliged or mandated to provide foreign workers the same benefits they would otherwise pay to domestic workers (such as social security benefits, unemployment insurance and seasonal agricultural workers compensation). Moreover, it is easier for these employers to control foreign worker who have been used to receiving inferior pay under poorer working conditions in their native countries and are concerned about the difficulty in getting another job if they are fired (Levine, 2006).

Levine (2006) did a fine job of explaining the economic theory behind the effects of changes in the labor market by showing how the employment of foreign labor will suppress wages from W_1 to W_2 and how the hiring of U.S. workers will cause a shift in labor input utilization from E_1

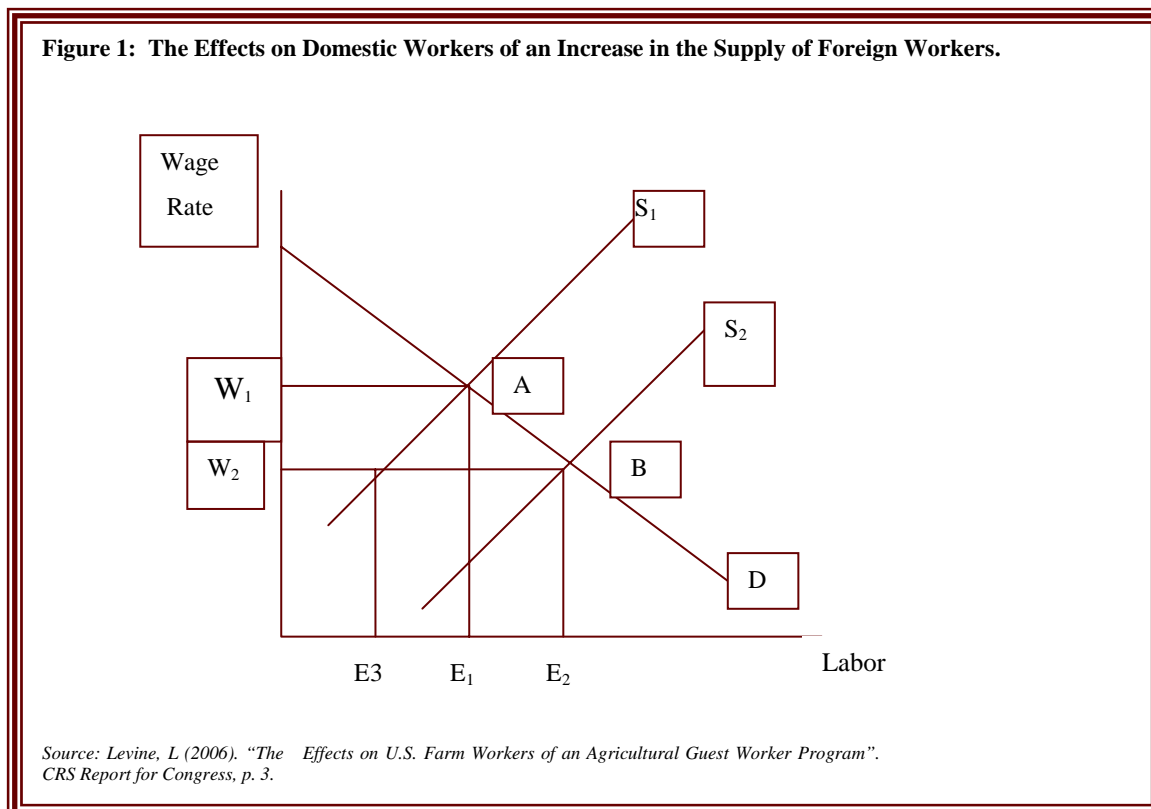
to E_3 concomitantly. Let's call this supply-side analysis, which is presented in Figure 1.

Point A is the equilibrium wage rate and U.S. labor supply. In a laymen's terminology, A is the point where the total available U.S. farm workers, E_1 , are willing to accept the farm wage rate W_1 offered to them by the growers. The supply-side theory contends that the decrease in wages for all farm labor is as a result of foreign workers coming in under the various guest worker programs and B is the point where farmers pay lower wages of W_2 to both the foreign and U.S. workers alike, i.e. at E_2 (Figure 1).

This theoretical explanation (Figure 1), however, seems to shed light on the scenario of the "Against Camp". It does not reflect the argument of the "For Camp" that claims that the demand for farm labor is higher than its supply thus, creating the need to bring in foreign labor. Figure 2 is the economic theory that attempts to explain the phenomena on the demand-side equation or the proponent side of the debate that argues that foreign workers are needed because there are insufficient U.S. workers willing to accept farm employment.

A higher real wage of W_1 will attract E_1 workers into farm employment. If growers decide to pay a lower real wage, W_2 , the number of farm workers that employers are willing to hire will be less than those willing to accept the employment. Due to this shortage of farm workers, growers who do not have sufficient labor force will have to pay higher real wages to attract them. On the other hand, if real wages are higher than W_1 , the number of people willing to accept farm work will be more than the number that employers can accommodate.

One of the arguments presented by the "Against Camp" was that farm employers favor foreign workers because they do not pay them bene-



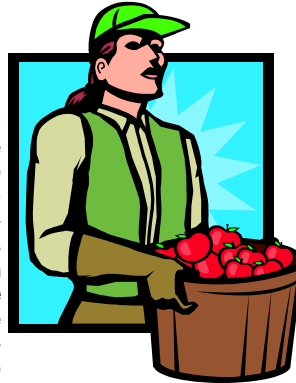
fits such as social insurance, workers compensation and unemployment insurance. Assuming that this allegation is true, the percentage of fixed dollar tax amount that employers are required to pay for these benefits will increase total real wage paid to the worker to $W_0 + X$. When this happens, growers will no longer demand E_1 workers at the equilibrium point where the demand for desired workers D_0 equal supply, S_0 . Instead, they will reduce the number of workers to E_3 at the intersection of point A on the new demand curve D_2 which shifted downward as a result of the additional fixed dollar amount imposed on farm employers for services such as social insurance, worker's compensation and unemployment benefits.

The only incentive for growers to hire E_1 workers is for real wages to decrease to $W_1 - X$ at point B on the new demand curve D_2 because at this point, growers will accrue the same cost as before the tax for those benefits was imposed. Also note here that the decrease in real wages to $W_1 - X$ will create labor shortage as U.S. farm labor supply will shrink and unfortunately increase foreign/migrant labor supply. If the taxes for the social benefits are paid by the government, then farm employers will still be willing to pay W_1 for E_1 workers at the equilibrium where the old demand curve D_1 intersects the supply curve S_1 . In other words, the labor shortage is created because of the additional payroll tax burden imposed to the farm employer by the government (which is the parallel line between the original demand curve D_1 and the shifted demand curve D_2).

The question then is who to blame: the government for imposing social benefits taxes on farm employers that create labor shortages OR farm employers for hiring foreign labor who will accept lower real wage to even out the equation? This then becomes a policy issue.

Impact of Migrant Labor Restriction

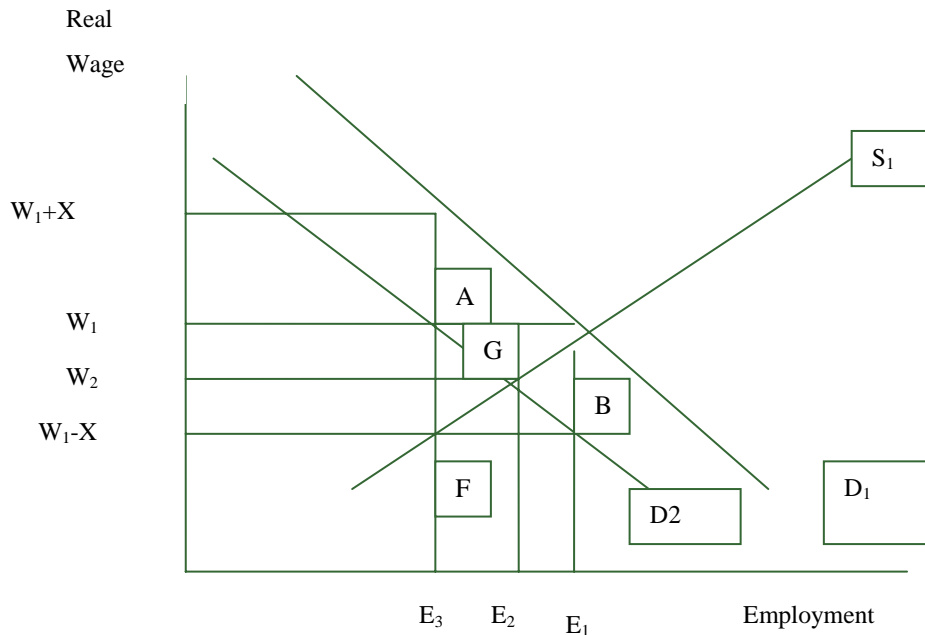
According to the American Farm Bureau Federation Economic Analysis Team Report, there were about 10 million people involved in farm work half a century ago (Figure 3). In 2005, the number dwindled to about 3 million workers out of which 2 million are members of farm families and 1 million hired elsewhere. Of these 1 million, 50% of them equivalent to half a million will be affected by the new immigration reform on migrant labor (AFBF, 2006).



This report also depicted that although farm labor wage rate is higher than wages paid in the food preparation industry, farm work has not really attracted workers from the food preparation industry even if a wage differential of \$2.86 in favor of farm wages exists (Figure 4). The reasons cited for this lack of interest in farm work among food preparation workers is that the working conditions in their industry are less tedious and more favorable than farm labor. Furthermore, the report revealed that the food preparation industry currently employs more workers than all the workers needed in agriculture as a whole. If food preparation workers are not willing to switch to farm labor even with a potential pay hike of \$2.86, then there is probably no chance that workers in the other industries such as cleaning, constructions, carpentry and or drywall where the wage rates are even a lot higher than farm labor wage would consider taking on farm jobs (Figure 4).

The U.S. agriculture is mostly dependent on hired labor, most of which are coming from foreign countries and generally known as migrant labor. Due to the dynamism of the agriculture industry (\$16.1 billion crop value in 2006 compared \$15.5 billion in 2003) and expansion (7.6 million acres in 2006 from 6.5 million acres in

Figure 2: The Effects of Farm Labor Shortage on Farm Employers due to a Decrease in U.S. Farm Labor Supply.



Source: Ehrenberg and Smith (1982). Modern Labor Economics, Theory and Public Policy, Dallas, TX, pp 12-78.

2003), the need for additional labor has become paramount (Fonsah, 2006). Estimates indicate that up to “\$5-\$9 billion in annual production of primarily import-sensitive commodities most dependent on migrant labor would be lost in the short term” and over \$6.5-\$12 billion will be lost in the longer-term if entrant of foreign labor into the United States is restricted (AFBF, 2006).

The fruits, vegetables and nursery industry will be impacted the most with an estimated “10%-20% of [its] output shifting to other countries, and increasing the U.S. trade deficit on virtually a dollar-for-dollar basis”. Furthermore 20%-33% of this labor intensive fresh fruits and vegetables industry’s production will disappear. The spill over effect from the fruits and vegetable industry ranging from increased cost of production and decreased supply will be felt in other traditional row crops and livestock sectors which do not rely heavily on migrant labor.

Nationally, estimates indicate that the U.S. farm sector might sustain estimated losses of \$1.5-\$5 billion in the short run and \$2.5-\$8 billion in the long-run (Table 1) due to reduced production and increased costs arising from the elimination of foreign or migrant labor (AFBF, 2006). At the state level, it is estimated that Georgia will be losing \$100.5-\$180.8 million in terms of reduced production in the short term and \$30.1-\$100.5 million loss in terms of income. In the long run, the state of Georgia will be losing from \$131 - \$241 million in production and from \$50 - \$161 million in income (Table 1).

Table 1: Financial Impact of New Immigration Labor Restriction To Georgia and the United States

Georgia	Production Loss (\$Million)	Income Loss (\$Million)
Short term	\$101 - \$181	\$30 - \$101
Long term	\$131 - \$241	\$50 - \$161
United States		
Short term	\$5,000 - \$ 9,000	\$1,500 - \$5,000
Long term	\$6,500 - \$12,000	\$2,500 - \$8,000

Source: American Farm Bureau Federation Report (2006). “Impact of Migrant Labor Restrictions on the Agricultural Sector”. Economic Analysis Team, February, p. 4.

Concluding remarks

This study has attempted to strike the balance between the two schools of thought, i.e. those who support and oppose the influx of migrant labor. The ultimate hope is that eventually issues still shrouding the immigration debates will be resolved and that compromises between different views of our legislators will be made that will prove to be beneficial, not only to a select few, but to the majority of the constituents.

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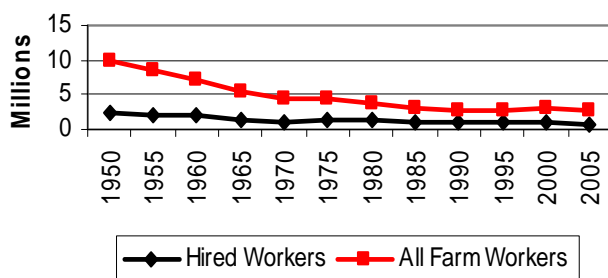
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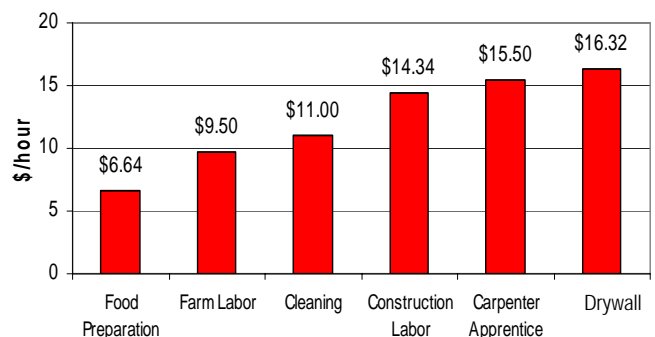
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Figure 3: United States Farm Workers: 1950-2005.



Sources: Department of Labor and American Farm Bureau Federation Report (2006). “Impact of Migrant Labor Restrictions on the Agricultural Sector”. Economic Analysis Team, February.

Figure 4: Wage Rates for Selected Categories



Source: American Farm Bureau Federation Report (2006). “Impact of Migrant Labor Restrictions on the Agricultural Sector”. Economic Analysis Team, February.

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