

## Vermont dairy farms count on illegal immigrants

By Wilson Ring, Staff Writer

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HIGHGATE, Vt. (AP) — A room off the milking parlor of a sprawling farm near the U.S.-Canada border offers a behind-the-scenes glimpse of the changing face of Vermont's dairy industry.



An Hispanic worker at a farm in Fairfield, Vt., milks cows Thursday, March 5, 2009. The way Sabin sees it, Vermont's dairy farms — unable to attract enough workers for the gritty job of milking cows and working the farm — would dry up entirely if not for labor imported from Mexico and elsewhere. (AP Photo/Toby Talbot)

A Spanish-language soap opera plays on a small TV atop the refrigerator. Bags of corn flour for tortillas are piled high in a basket across the room from bunk beds. “Dios bendiga esta casa” (God bless this house) is scrawled above the door of the room, home to a Guatemalan man and a Mexican couple.

A pregnant Mexican woman still in knee-high rubber boots is visited by Nancy Sabin, a volunteer who finds dairy farm jobs for Hispanic workers. On this afternoon, she brings thrift-shop baby clothes.

“If it wasn't for the Hispanics,” Sabin says, “there would be no family farms. There would be no farms, period.”

This is the open secret behind the black-and-white Holsteins, rolling hills and postcard images: Unable to attract local workers for the grueling job of milking cows and working the farm, Vermont, the nation's 14th-largest dairy state, props up its dairy industry with perhaps thousands of immigrant laborers, many of whom are in the U.S. illegally.

“Everyone knows some of these people are illegal,” says Vermont Agriculture Secretary Roger Allbee. But, he says, “The system is broken. There's the need for labor.”

Recognizing their dependence on these workers — whatever their status — Vermonters have worked out a system to protect the status quo.

In Burlington and Middlebury, police have policies in place not to bother Hispanics about immigration issues unless they're breaking the law.

And recognizing that the farms are vulnerable to enforcement sweeps, even Allbee is part of an emergency response team that is ready to step in and do chores if a farmer's workers are ever hauled away on immigration charges (The team has never been used.).

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, a branch of the Department of Homeland Security, refused to discuss its operations in Vermont.

"ICE does not discuss investigative activity," says ICE spokeswoman Paula Grenier in Boston.

Several years ago, an informal survey estimated Vermont had about 2,000 Hispanic workers, but the real number of immigrant workers on the state's dairy farms isn't known.

In California, the nation's largest dairy state, Hispanic labor has been the norm for decades. Dairy producers there require documentation from the workers, and if the documents don't turn out to be valid, the worker is let go, said Michael Marsh, CEO of Western United Dairymen of Modesto, which represents many of his state's dairy producers.

Like Vermont, other big dairy states in the North have also become increasingly dependent in recent years on immigrant labor. A February study out of the University of Wisconsin estimated 40 percent of the hired labor on the state's farms were immigrants — the vast majority Mexicans — many with no immigration documents.

Vermont's immigrants present what appear to be valid work documents, but farmers say they can't always tell if they're legitimate. Allbee says the federal program that would enable farmers to verify documents is unworkable.

Seasonal farmers who grow apples or other crops that aren't harvested year-round can get needed labor through a special visa program that allows foreign workers to come to the United States for short periods of time. But the law has no provision for the dairy industry, which works 365 days a year.

The rise in Hispanic laborers follows a trend of fewer but larger farms in Vermont. The state now has just more than 1,000 dairy farms, compared with more than 2,300 in 1992.

Gone are the days when a family could run a farm without outside help. Now, some farms milk their cows 24 hours a day. Few people are willing to do the work, which can be 60-hour weeks in weather so hot that flies swarm or so cold that exposed skin will freeze.

"The immigrant workers have just been a godsend to these farms," says Bob Stoddardt, vice president of member services for the dairy cooperative Agrimark, which has about 1,300 member farms in the six New England states and New York. "Their drive and work ethic are just unbelievable."

While many in Vermont agree, critics say the farmers aren't looking hard enough for American workers.

Jessica Vaughan, director of policy studies with the Washington-based Center for Immigration Studies, which favors limits on immigration, said farms and other businesses have grown dependent on cheap, illegal labor.

"Industry has turned out to be almost addicted to that supply of (illegal) workers and as a result have never had to do anything different, to see if there's a way to make the job more appealing," said Vaughan, of Franklin, Mass.

But Vermont agriculture officials say the immigrant farm workers aren't cheap labor. The immigrants can net \$35,000 a year or more, with their housing and utilities — and in some cases food, telephone, satellite television and health care — paid for by the farmers. Benefits can put costs per employee at more than \$50,000.

One 22-year-old farmhand named Juan says he paid about \$2,800 to be smuggled into the United States, walking for four nights before he was picked up and taken to Kentucky in the back of a small truck. He ended up in Vermont.

He's been in Vermont for 19 months, sending money home to his family and saving some to open a little store and build himself a house one day. He makes \$435 a week with housing, food and utilities paid for.

"The necessity in Mexico is what brings one here," Juan told The Associated Press during an interview in Spanish. "For me, I don't think I'd do it again. It's very dangerous. I suffered a lot."

He'd like to go home to Mexico for good this fall.

Despite state efforts to protect them, illegal workers still live in fear, afraid to leave their farms for fear of arrest and deportation — and vulnerable to exploitation as a result, advocates say. In Vermont, they stand out: Census data show nearly 97 percent of residents are white.

Last fall, a group of immigrant workers in northwest Vermont were robbed in their homes. They wouldn't call the police. Police found out from a farmer, and eventually charged some fellow immigrant farm workers in the theft, but the victims were protected.

No large-scale roundups have occurred in Vermont, as in other parts of the country.

But Allbee, the agriculture secretary, says, "Everyone is nervous because, obviously, the law needs to be addressed and changed in some fashion."

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