

The Oregonian

Immigration reform: Oregon businesses need an adequate labor force

By [Guest Columnist](#)

March 29, 2010, 9:00AM

By Bill Perry and Jeff Stone

As we move beyond the debate around health care reform, it's time for our nation's leaders to turn their attention to an issue that is long overdue -- comprehensive immigration reform. President Barack Obama has said time and again that this is an issue the administration is willing to tackle, and businesses across the country need our elected officials to act.

The Coalition for a Working Oregon was formed more than two years ago to raise the profile of immigration reform and help make the economic case for it. Our broad-based membership, comprising 22 employer groups representing nearly every economic sector in the state, came together under one banner to support comprehensive reform on the federal level. Now, with the current recession and so many businesses at risk, our mission is more important than ever.

The American immigration system is broken, and it's costing us dearly. It's holding us back from economic recovery and hurting businesses that are already struggling to survive. Despite the recession and our state's high unemployment rate, many Oregon employers still do not have an adequate supply of workers to fill their labor needs. The lack of available workers in many of our state's key industries means missed economic opportunities and a prolonged recession. The fact is that thousands of Oregon businesses depend on immigrant labor, and the system is not delivering the labor force that these businesses need to succeed.

Studies have consistently shown that immigrant labor increases overall economic productivity while raising wages and the standard of living for domestic workers. In fact, the Coalition for a Working Oregon commissioned an independent economic analysis that found the elimination of immigrant workers in the state would significantly retract the state's economy and eliminate tens of thousands of "native" jobs. You cannot disconnect immigrant labor from non-immigrant labor; everything is interdependent. Without a strong labor force, our local businesses, tax revenues and overall economic output all suffer.

Employers need immediate, working solutions that are market-driven and responsive to both current and future employment needs. Any proposed reform legislation must include provisions allowing employers access to a reliable future flow of workers, ensuring that we have the workforce we need in the years to come. Other important components to comprehensive reform include increased border security and sanctions against unscrupulous employers that do not follow the law.

Immigration is a federal issue, and time is running out for Congress to enact meaningful reform this year. If our leaders in Washington fail to address immigration reform in the coming months, they have failed American businesses. We will be left battling ineffective and economically damaging local legislation that will only divide the nation and put Oregon employers further at risk.

All across the country, people are demanding change. Recently, supporters of reform demonstrated on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., and their message to Congress was clear: The time has come for immigration reform. We simply cannot afford to wait any longer.

Bill Perry is director of government affairs for the Oregon Restaurant Association. Jeff Stone is director of government relations for the Oregon Association of Nurseries. Both are co-chairmen of the Coalition for a Working Oregon.