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FRUITS OF IMMIGRANT LABOR

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Republicans are often first in line to vote for farm subsidies. But when it comes to lending farmers a hand by modernizing the country's guest-worker program, many hide in the corn stalks. A new study quantifies the costs of the GOP's immigration duck.

The American Farm Bureau Federation commissioned independent economists to analyze how immigration reform would affect farm production and food prices. Their conclusion is that any fix that doesn't expand the legal pathways for immigrants to enter and work in the U.S. will cost farmers and consumers a bundle.

About half of the country's 1.1 million hired farm hands are estimated to be undocumented, largely because the current H-2A visa program is a bureaucratic nightmare. The Labor Department is slow to process visa applications, so farmers often don't get the labor they need in time for harvest – if workers show up at all. Guest workers also aren't allowed to change jobs or stay in the country for more than a year. Thus many simply overstay and become illegal. In 2010 a labor shortage cost more than \$320 million in farm losses.

An enforcement-only approach to immigration would further shrink the supply of farm hands, thereby driving up labor costs. The study finds that farmers would have to raise wages to \$26.57 per hour from an average today of \$10.80 to replace undocumented workers.

Higher wages sound great, assuming enough Americans would pick berries and tomatoes. But they haven't in the past. More likely is that many of these jobs would vanish as farmers grew less here, moved more production overseas, or shifted to crops that can be harvested with machines.

The study also examines the effects of legalizing 11 million undocumented immigrants coupled with tougher enforcement. The impact on farmers is only slightly less destructive since undocumented immigrants once legalized would move to more attractive jobs in other industries. That's what happened after the 1986 reform that legalized illegals without offering new opportunities for guest workers.

Within five years of legalization, the study predicts that at least half of the country's undocumented workers would leave agriculture. Farmers would have to raise wages to between \$14.04 and \$18.25 an hour to attract domestic workers, assuming they could still get them, which would cause their incomes to drop by between 7 percent and 14 percent and food prices to rise by 2 percent to 3 percent.

The only reform alternative in the study that wouldn't harm farmers and consumers is a redesigned guest-worker program. The study proposes that the new visa be renewable after three years, allow workers to change employers and be available to dairy farmers and ranchers. This is similar to provisions that passed the Senate.

However, the Senate bill also restricts farm guest workers to 337,000 over five years, which would only meet about two-thirds of farmers' needs. A farm guest-worker bill that passed the House Judiciary Committee last summer would do better, though it invites political

tinkering by allowing the Agriculture Secretary to lower, but not raise, its 500,000 cap on visas.

Republicans have killed immigration reform for now, but the Farm Bureau study shows that in the real economy it's still needed. The irony is that many Republicans who support handouts to farmers oppose reforms that wouldn't cost taxpayers a dime and would help the economy.