Farmers Push For Stable Workforce In Immigration Reform

SHANNON DININNY,Associated Press

YAKIMA, Wash. (AP) — Farmers who grow labor-intensive tree fruit crops must continue to be vocal about the need for comprehensive immigration reform to ensure agriculture is included in any solution for the nation's broken immigration system, several farm groups told Washington state growers at a conference Tuesday.

Bottom line: If growers can't prune, pick, pack and process their fruit, little else matters, said U.S. Apple Association President Nancy Foster.

"The status quo is untenable," she told about 100 growers at the Washington state Horticultural Association's annual meeting.

More than 1 million people labor in U.S. orchards and fields across the country each year, and in Washington state, agriculture employs about 160,000 people. Thousands are estimated to be in the country illegally, and many farmers say the U.S. crackdown on illegal immigrants has resulted in labor shortages.

Some critics argue that growers would have enough workers if they paid more. Among the 50 states, Washington has the highest minimum wage at $9.04 per hour. Harvest workers are often paid based on how much they pick, but they're guaranteed at least minimum wage.

However, a growing number of farmers have turned to a federal guest-worker program to bring in foreign workers, despite longstanding complaints that it's too cumbersome and expensive to be of any real help. Growers in the program generally must pay a higher wage, plus provide housing and transportation in and out of the country.

In Washington state, Gov. Chris Gregoire has pushed the federal government to enact immigration reform that includes a viable guest-worker program, border protection and a path to citizenship for illegal workers.

Farmers are as close to seeing meaningful immigration reform as they've been in the past decade, said Jon Wyss, who handles labor issues for Gebbers Farms, a large grower in north-central Washington that fired hundreds of workers after it was subject to a federal immigration audit three years ago.

But whether comprehensive reform occurs in Congress next year remains to be seen, so growers must make their voices heard to push for change, he said.

Wyss said national farm groups have joined together to propose a new reform

package that would reduce the requirements for growers to recruit workers before turning to a guest-worker program, and would move that program from the purview of the Labor Department to the more farm-friendly Agriculture Department.

He also noted that the American Farm Bureau also supports the package, marking the first time the country's major farm groups are in agreement on the issue.

Speakers at the conference also touched on the state budget, the upcoming legislative session, a new Washington governor, and on the farm bill, which will either have to be extended into next year or passed in the remaining weeks of Congress' session.

The 2008 farm bill expired Sept. 30, but members of the House and Senate have been struggling to reach a deal before the end of the year amid the so-called "fiscal cliff," a looming $500 billion combination of automatic spending cuts and tax increases in the first nine months of next year alone.

Source URL (retrieved on *12/18/2014 - 1:36pm*):
http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/news/2012/12/farmers-push-stable-workforce-immigration-reform