

Help wanted

As a country we are seeing the effects of a half-century of societal change. More people are going to college. They are making career choices that provide a higher standard of living, but these choices don't involve the work needed to feed a country or dig trees.

For agriculture, the shortage of labor is real. It is unpredictable, uncharted in its severity and certainly untenable.

To put it simply, without a labor force many industries would go away. There is only so much a mechanization process can do. There is no replacement for a human touch in raising trees and plants.

In 2009, more people were born than left the workforce. It's the first time that happened in the United States since 1971. This 38-year bubble will burst in the coming years and will have a lasting impact on the American economy. The children of 2009 will not be of working age until 2027, and meanwhile? There will be lots of retirements. That's a long time to wait while the air deflates from the balloon that is our workforce.

And will these children be the kind of workers that agriculture needs? Will they want to use their hands and backs, and do the hard work that is required for agriculture? It's doubtful.

Unless you are born into working with soil, water and plants, it's probably not something that you will seek out. Growers of all sizes across Oregon know this. They can see what is coming.

We are seeing the impact of decades of policy failure. The "Help Wanted" poster is on the front door of the industry, and it is becoming pretty clear that not many are taking up the opportunity. This has a tremendous consequence for labor-intensive industries such as the nursery and greenhouse industry. Without adequate labor, it will be far more difficult to produce quality plants.

The visa system is not working anymore

The immigration system is broken. The visa system, including the H-2A visa, was built to help the agricultural community obtain temporary skilled labor. But over the last three decades, the nature of the immigrant workforce has changed from less of a migratory workforce to one that performs more regular, full-time work.

For the farm operations that are far more seasonal, the H-2A visa may be more viable even though success is far from guaranteed. It is costly for employers, who must pay travel, housing and wages. The process is unwieldy, especially with homegrown workers who may be eligible for work on the farm but are not as interested in hard and physical labor.

Members have told me horror stories replete with high cost, extended paperwork and a convoluted process. If successful, all this nets them is a temporary worker who may be utilized for three years max — and often less, if the situation doesn't work out. Then the worker must return to their home country, taking with them the skills they developed at employer time and expense.

So right now, the grower's choices are to struggle to find workers, try their hand at the flawed H-2A process, or risk having a field that contains far too many plants and far too few workers to finish and ship them.

We must push for a better way. However, any mention of reforming the immigration system is always met with an unhinged toxic response. In today's Congress, passing any kind of sensible, market-based approach to immigration is next to impossible. Still, the labor issue is so critical that our association must make every effort to resolve it. We will look at smaller proposals and hope to build, over time, something that works for all segments of the agricultural economy.

A crisis decades in the making

I have spoken to more than three decades' worth of OAN leaders, and all



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have pointed to the concern and need for labor. Our national association, AmericanHort, has pushed for comprehensive reform of the immigration system to deal with the structural decline in homegrown workers. So have all the states. But even if the policy were to be corrected tomorrow, it would take years for that to translate into real-world outcomes for agriculture.

Every May, the OAN goes to Washington, D.C., to talk to our elected congressional representatives and executive branch administration officials. This year, like every year, solving our labor problems is paramount on the list. Every year, it ends up being about the next cycle. Perhaps then, they say, the time will be right to get it done.

We are like Sisyphus. Immigration reform is our rock. Like the punished man in Greek mythology, we push the rock up the hill. We reach the summit, only to have the rock fall down to the bottom where we have to start again.

Our attempts may seem futile, but I believe that making the attempt is never in vain. It is too important to the long-term survival of the industry. We must be resolute and work toward a common-sense approach that promotes the value and reward of working in the nursery and greenhouse industry.

We have built a rich heritage of growing plants and investing in a skilled workforce. No obstacle should deter our continued efforts to solve one of the defining issues of our time. Without people the industry will falter. Growers need labor. We need a solution. ☺