

We are your advocate

For some, May Day signals an unofficial start of summer.

Warmer days and less rain give many of the plants our industry grows the ability to dazzle and amaze the landscape with color and greenery.

For others, May Day has been a day of protests — a time to push the edges of our political system and call for particular labor agenda items.

There is plenty to be concerned about on the labor front: severe shortages, increased enforcement activity by federal agencies, and a plethora of bills introduced at the state level to either give sanctuary status or hammer the enforcement side of immigration.

In the midst of all this activity, we need to focus on solutions — not snippets heard on television, radio or social media. The issue of immigration and the agricultural labor force is too big and too important to whittle away at the edge. The check is due on immigration reform and so far Congress has dined and dashed when immigration is on the menu.

Immigration has been broken for over 30 years

I was an aide to United States Senator Bob Packwood (R-Oregon) in the years immediately following the last major immigration reform package passed under President Ronald Reagan.

The Immigration Reform and Control Act was supposed to do two main things:

1. Provide status for non-violent undocumented individuals, and
2. Craft a guest worker program to help relieve pressure on agricultural producers and other industries that depend on a reliable and stable immigrant workforce.

“Amnesty” was granted, but in 1988 (when I joined Packwood’s staff) the second part of the congressional action was floundering and collapsed. U.S. Senator Alan Simpson, the longtime Wyoming Republican maverick, was in charge of this process and tried his very best to get the issue resolved. He criticized his fellow members for “minimal moments of clarity” as immigration drew more fire from the far left and far right.

Simpson’s colleagues indicated that the issue is hard and Congress should take its time to get it right. It never happened, and 29 years have passed since meaningful reform has occurred.

The bill is due

The years of a broken immigration system have caught up to agriculture. Businesses are experiencing a severe labor shortage, along with the outright fear of losing a valuable, skilled and hardworking workforce.

Oregon is a top nursery producer in the country and the second largest agricultural sector in the state. Many of the nurseries that survived the Great Recession are growing again. Markets are rebounding. In fact, the market is strong enough that under normal circumstances, many nurseries would be seeing 20-percent growth due to the demand.

Unfortunately, the labor supply is cutting them off at the knees. As a result, they are growing only 2 percent.

Bad policy is an artificial cap on growth and employment. It is a self-inflicted wound and wholly avoidable. Fixing bad policy is not simple by any stretch, but if the nursery industry can build coalitions with other business and agricultural sectors, faith communities and labor and immigrant rights groups, then Washington D.C. can do it, too.

The Oregon business community did an economic study a while back and found that the short-term unemployment rate would jump significantly if undocumented workers were no longer available. A ripple effect would engulf the economy. Businesses would shed 173,500 jobs, including 76,000 held by legal, documented or native-born individuals, resetting the unemployment rate from the current 4 percent to 11.7 percent. The state’s economy would shrink by \$17.7 billion. When the damage is done, it will be too late to fix.

Congress fiddles while immigration burns

Congress would make the Roman Emperor Nero proud. Ignoring a problem has a cost — one that, as a member organization, we cannot let them ignore without a strong response.



Jeff Stone
OAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The OAN is giving members resources to deal with the growing uncertainty of the administration’s new enforcement policy. The wine and nursery leaders recently met with Oregon Governor Kate Brown about federal visa programs, growing fear in immigrant communities, and our commitment to be a national force working toward a solution. I reminded the governor that President Trump is not wrong declaring that the immigration system is broken.

As part of our mission, we are providing members-only content to OAN members on our Workforce resource page — www.oan.org/workforce. Our legal counsel, Steve Shropshire, attorney with Jordan Ramis PC, wrote an article explaining how to make sure your I-9 employment eligibility records are in ship-shape, and what to do if immigration enforcement agents come knocking on your door.

The webpage has additional information from trusted sources and will continue to be updated with current news and information as well as helpful downloads.

In addition to e-mail blasts, we will use the OAN Facebook page to let people know about updates to the Workforce page.

We are not alone. Others in agriculture have joined up and are providing similar information to their organizations. This is necessary for our collective survival.

Let us not forget that America is a nation of immigrants. Every group in the history of our country has made it better. Our state is stronger when we are inclusive. We will remain a voice of reason and do our very best to represent the many voices that make up this incredible association and industry. ☺