

Set up guest worker program — or there'll be no one to pick crops

The war on illegal immigration has a new target: employers. The Obama administration recently announced a crackdown on the hiring of illegal

Viewpoint



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immigrants. Rather than rounding up the usual suspects — illegal workers — and then prosecuting and/or deporting them, the Obama Justice Department is focusing on U.S. citizens who employ illegal workers.

Recently, federal agents raided a restaurant chain in Arizona and California called Chuy's Mesquite Broiler.

The feds didn't bother parading the numerous illegal workers arrested at the chain's 14 restaurants into federal court. Instead, prosecutors are charging only the chain's American citizen owners, Mark and Christopher Evenson.

Here in Colorado, we're already seeing the effects of this policy. Denver-based Chipotle is under federal criminal investigation for knowingly employing illegal workers, and the state's agriculture, construction and hospitality industries are bracing for their own federal scrutiny.

Indeed, the potential impact on Colorado industries and businesses is significant, both in terms of dollars (lost revenue, costs of defense and more) and in negative public perception and lost good will. Colorado's resort industry is a potential high-profile target for the feds, as are ranches, farms, cement companies, construction outfits and numerous other businesses.

From a more global perspective, the potential impact of raids and prosecutions on Colorado's economy is obvious. Agriculture remains the state's largest industry, and its companies and workers also provide juicy targets for federal authorities.

The impact of the federal government — and Colorado's own — crackdown on illegal immigration is being felt by employers, beyond the potential for

criminal penalties and prosecution.

The state's agricultural community typically employs 10,000 migrant farm workers — some legal, some illegal. But due to the state's own changes, compounded now by federal moves, many experts have predicted a 40 percent decrease in available labor to Colorado farmers for the 2011 growing season. State officials even have considered experimental programs to put prison inmates to work in the agricultural community to cover the labor shortfall.

The prospect of raids and criminal penalties for employers, and workers' fear of roundups and deportation, have the potential to cripple agricultural production in our state. Without the necessary seasonal workers, fruits and vegetables will go unpicked, farmers will suffer devastating financial losses and Colorado's economy will take another hit at a time when we can least afford it. The same scenario could play out across our other vital industries as the months unfold.

For the Justice Department, concentrating on employers makes sense in terms of deterring other businesses from breaking the law and in collecting fines and other penalties from those who can afford to pay them. Many businesses in Colorado not only knowingly hire and employ illegal workers, but also house them, a federal criminal offense known as "harboring."

But what about those employers who rely on migrant or illegal workers — those who will do the jobs Coloradans and other legal workers won't?

Despite the potential devastating effects of law enforcement actions on Colorado employers, our congressional delegation — perhaps because there's no political upside to taking on this issue before the 2012 elections — is standing silent. But now isn't the time to play politics with an issue that can have significant and deleterious impacts on a fragile state economy.

Many of the illegal workers in this state have no desire to become citizens or to remain here permanently; instead, they seek to earn money, usually through very difficult labor that is not

performed by U.S. citizens, and then return home to their lives and families.

A guest worker program that allows for an influx of legal foreign labor is an obvious solution to Colorado's acute labor shortage. The federal government

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is well-placed to oversee and supervise such a program, just as it does with foreign students and others who live in the United States for a finite period of time and for a specific reason.

Indeed, rather than focusing the government's efforts on a Band Aid solution to illegal immigration by targeting high-profile employers for trying to fill their work rosters, the business community should think about urging our representatives to have the courage to address a simple reality: There aren't enough U.S. citizens willing to fill the jobs we need to get our state and national economy back on track.

Only when we, and our politicians, are willing to have a realistic discussion about immigration law will we find a true solution to this issue. Until then, be on the lookout for large men in blue windbreakers and sunglasses the next time you're in line to buy a burrito.

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THE PULSE

In last week's web survey, we asked:

When will employment in metro Denver return to pre-recession levels?

We received 334 responses.

