

Common Dreams, Common Ground

By Ben LaCross

Like all of the young American farmers I know, Leo has dreams, ambitions and goals. He wants to provide a better life for his family. He's focused on the goal of sending his son to college. It's a typical American story. But Leo's story strays from the traditional plot. Leo is from Mexico.

Some would call Leo a farm worker. I call him a farmer. For a big chunk of each year, Leo is my right-hand man, working beside me to tend my Michigan cherry orchard and bring in the harvest. Leo is invaluable to my success as an American farmer. In fact, Leo is an integral part of my farm's business family.

Without the seasonal farm services provided by Leo and his counterparts on farms all across our nation, the ability to grow, tend and harvest food in America would grind to a halt.

I cherish the fact that my farm helps provide for families beyond my own. One of the things I love about being a farmer is extending someone else a job. Agriculture is economic development. Our nation and our rural communities are strengthened by agriculture, and one major factor in that strength is the jobs that our farms and ranches create.

As I study the landscape, however, I am troubled that the positive aspects of providing the economic boost of a farm job are being overwhelmed by the divisive tone set by those who refuse to understand the demographic reality of today's agricultural workforce.

While I was growing up and our farm was smaller, local high school kids filled many of the manual labor positions. Older workers from our community would often hire on as sprayers, mechanics and harvesters. A few seasonal migrant laborers would fill in as needed. There is no way to turn back that clock.

Today, most people in our local community have found less strenuous, less demanding jobs – and in some cases for salaries less than what we offer. As our farm has grown and new workers are needed, we have made decisions that make the most sense for our farm.

This spring, I decided to hire two full time positions to supplement our current workforce. An ad was placed on the local unemployment website. Resumes were submitted. Interviews were conducted. The lack of work experience and skills by many was disturbing. Propositions to receive payment “under the table” so they could continue to receive unemployment benefits was appalling.

In the end, I needed employees to help grow my perishable fruit. I gave several local candidates a chance. Six men, to be exact, were hired. Five don't work for me anymore. Each man had a different reason to leave the job, and each left me scrambling to find qualified replacements.

Amidst this turnover, the rest of my crew returned, many for their 12th year. These men, including Leo, are all from Mexico. As members of our nation's mobile migrant workforce, they have become essential to the success of each year's crop on my farm. And they leave each fall to run a cotton gin in Georgia.

The bottom line is that Leo comes to work when I need him and he works for someone else when I don't. He and other migrant workers contribute to our communities, fill a need and are productive members of society. They aren't the cause of the financial dismay our country is facing. In fact, I could argue that by moving around the country to stay employed, seasonal laborers are a model of work ethic and entrepreneurship.

Our nation does have an immigration problem, one that can only be solved by comprehensive immigration and border security reform. A patchwork approach of state laws and government agency crackdowns is not a solution.

But we must have an honest dialogue about who is going to perform skilled, manual labor in our country in the future. If we want those workers to be “local,” we must champion skilled, manual labor as a vocation worthy of aspiration.

And, perhaps we will have no other choice. Because Leo's son is not going to be pruning my orchards in the middle of a cold Michigan winter. He is going to college.