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IMMIGRATION AND AGRICULTURAL LABOR POLICY

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The issues in the immigration reform debate and their impact on agriculture are complex and far reaching. The basic issue is that our immigration policies are essentially out of control and all of us, agriculture included, have become dependent upon an estimated 2 to 13 million illegal aliens who make hotel beds; cook, serve, and wash dishes in restaurants; sew clothing in garment factories; and harvest fresh fruits and vegetables countrywide.

The critical problem is how to get our borders under control and how to address the far reaching problems of agricultural employers and workers. Aside from consideration of how to control our borders, the debate includes whether to implement and how to structure a foreign guest worker program for agriculture that includes provision for transportation, housing, and an adverse effect wage rate high enough to protect domestic workers.

Also of concern is how to provide fool-proof worker identification for farm workers and others without requiring all of us to carry worker I.D. cards; whether the Department of Agriculture should assume a larger role in policy formulation, research, and education in the area of agricultural labor; and whether the Secretary of Labor, the Attorney General, and/or the Secretary of Agriculture should have final determination of when and how many temporary farm workers to authorize.

Other policy issues being addressed by agriculture and others today include whether it is efficient to continue programs such as CETA (JTDA) which train people out of agriculture while demand factors require new entrants to be brought in to replace those leaving; the needed structural adjustments to agricultural labor markets as farm workers are included under more worker protection laws similar to coverage in non-agricultural industries; and whether agricultural labor should be included under the provisions of the National Labor Relations Act or similar national legislation.

Running through this entire debate is the chilling prospect that some proposed policy alternatives may force the transfer of fresh fruit, vegetable, and other labor intensive enterprises to other countries if

producers are denied labor, domestic or foreign, at wages which will allow domestic producers to compete with foreign production. The transfer of production of labor intensive crops to other countries not only eliminates the need for supplemental seasonal labor but may also eliminate thousands of U.S. workers employed in related production, packing, processing, and transportation jobs as well.

In the final analysis the policy choices will determine who wins and who loses. The workshop discussion will focus on this question.