

## **Is There a Labor Shortage?**

Not a day goes by that I don't get a media inquiry about our labor availability here in the Salinas Valley. The hot topic, apparently, is if we will have enough hands to harvest the leafy greens, vegetables, and strawberries that our nation depends on daily for their dinner tables. And only since the Inauguration has the national media gotten interested in this issue that Ag has dealing with for years.

With all the rhetoric coming from Washington, D.C. on immigration policy and the surrounding issues of deportation, documentation, and immigrant labor, there is a heightened sense of awareness in the local Agriculture community that this may be the year of tougher labor availability. The early signs are there, including uneasiness within the immigrant communities of our County.

Most every farm operation here in the Salinas Valley is keenly aware of the immigration and labor issues facing us locally, regionally, and nationally. Many of the local Ag organizations have participated in a national coalition of business and Ag organizations working to get comprehensive immigration policy reform with a temporary worker program through Congress. We've come close a few times in the past 15 years, but there is still no substantial victory for either Ag employers or the immigrant labor they depend on. This has been very disappointing for all involved.

With our current policy issues stemming from incomplete legislation going back to the late 1980s and the IRCA reform done at that time, Congress has created a national policy that fails in many respects when it comes to providing safe and reliable labor for Agriculture. No matter the number of times these shortcomings are pointed out to Congress, there is no legislative movement due to partisan bickering over the details of any reform actions.

Salinas Valley Ag employers have been dealing with these policy shortcomings as best they can. The current temporary worker program, H-2A, is difficult to manage, requires an extended application timeframe, many times is late in providing harvest workers, and is expensive. Furthermore, it's not really suited to the types of specialty crops we produce locally. Many Ag employers have been challenged to make this program work, with a few success must mostly failures.

One of the requirements that comes with H-2A is a housing requirement for the temporary workers who are authorized to work; this puts an expensive requirement upon the employer, one that many cannot supply due to the lack of decent, affordable housing in our County. Several local Ag operations are taking on this requirement by building new farm worker housing, such as the excellent project built at Spreckels Crossing last year.

It's also clear that American citizens are not interested in field work jobs; many of these jobs pay well above the minimum wage, with piece rate incentives that can take the hourly wage well above that level. Yet, many of these jobs are not filled simply because Americans are not willing to do this type of physical labor. So we become dependent on immigrant labor to do the work of harvesting our domestic food supply.

So, are we experiencing a labor shortage? Salinas Valley Ag operations have seen this in many of the past five years. Do we expect this to continue? Yes, until we resolve our national immigration policy and approve a temporary program that allows workers to move easily across borders as necessary, including when they go home voluntarily and then return for work in the U.S.

Many local Ag operations have been reaching out to their employees to reassure them of their jobs and their ability to continue working locally. Many participated in the May 1<sup>st</sup> awareness events, and local Ag organizations have co-sponsored multiple forums in the community to help spread the word on local efforts to protect fieldworker jobs for local immigrants.

We need to solve these greater policy issues and provide those who have been part of our communities for many years with a pathway to documentation. The realization locally is that Ag operations cannot harvest their crops without the immigrant workforce that we have supported all along.

Failed Federal policy created this mess; let's work together to clean it up and secure a reliable immigrant workforce for Agriculture.