



If Farmers Need Foreign Labor, Something Is Wrong

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Drover, a trade publication for the beef industry, recently published an article arguing that immigration enforcement and a booming economy are making it difficult for farmers to find affordable labor. Meanwhile, the *Des Moines Register*, one of the biggest newspapers in America's Midwestern farm country, is claiming that "Iowa's economy depends on its 84,000 immigrant workers — including those here without legal documentation." If you listened to the agricultural journalists, you'd think we need to declare open borders in order to keep produce, meat and milk flowing to American households. But are any of these claims based on reality?

The honest answer is, "No." According to *Downsizing the Federal Government*, a project of the Cato Institute, Congress "spends more than \$20 billion a year on subsidies for farm businesses." By way of comparison, the United States spends just under \$50 billion on its entire foreign aid budget – which funds everything from health improvement to national security programs. That means a single sector of the U.S. economy is receiving taxpayer funded support that amounts to 40 percent of what we spend building defensive alliances and promoting world peace.

And asking for low-wage foreign workers simply amounts to the agricultural industry demanding another subsidy. That should prompt American taxpayers to ask what is it that farmers are doing wrong? Virtually every other industry manages to engage labor at market wages, and turn a profit, without price supports, market manipulation, import barriers, and government funded insurance.

Farmers will tell you that their industry is special. It involves greater risk than other fields of endeavor. And, after all, we've got to eat, and food security is national security. Therefore, they should be given government assistance and allowed to employ whatever workers are necessary to bring in the harvest.

But that's just effective marketing from the farm lobby. In reality, farming and ranching aren't any riskier than many other important industries, ranging from the seaborne shipment of goods to building bridges. And as *Downsizing the Federal Government* notes, "Subsidies discourage farmers from innovating, cutting costs, diversifying their land use, and taking other actions needed to prosper in the competitive economy."

American workers are not shy about getting their hands dirty. They'll work farm jobs – and any other jobs – provided that employers pay a fair market wage. The problem with American agriculture is that a rigged system, designed to ensure profits for farmers, keeps anyone from knowing what wages the market will bear. The solution to that problem, however, isn't to throw open our borders and allow agri-business to exploit cheap foreign labor at the expense of American workers. Instead, we should allow free market competition to bring agriculture into the 21st Century.