

# THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

## Stop playing politics with illegal workers

By: Tom Nassif – January 15, 2013

---

If there is a silver lining to losing, it's seeing life through the lens of reality and learning something in the process. I'm a Republican, and my party lost on Nov. 6. What did we learn? Lesson one is the changing face of our electorate. Hispanic voters comprised 10 percent of the vote, and Mitt Romney won only slightly more than a quarter of their support. And Hispanic voters will make up 20 percent of the vote in 2030.

The country is changing, and we either change with it or follow the 19th century Whig Party into extinction. With a political wake-up call, Republicans are now sitting down with Democrats, working to write new legislation – and not a moment too soon.

Some industries and businesses cannot survive without foreign workers, and for labor-intensive agriculture in California, their presence is especially critical. There is another key demographic in America: the 100 percent of people who eat. They require human hands to plant, harvest, pack and deliver fresh fruit, vegetables and tree nuts to their plates every day.

Our industry has openly conceded that it is dependent on foreign workers, many who are improperly documented. For the last 15 years, California farmers have been pleading with Congress for a practical agricultural worker program through meaningful immigration reform. Last year, many of our farmers reported labor shortages, and we anticipate this situation will worsen without sensible policy changes. I believe Americans will support immigration reform when it includes legal channels for temporary immigrant farm workers combined with registration and tracking requirements to improve national security and border control. Last year, Western Growers Association released a nationwide poll revealing that 70 percent of likely American voters would support a streamlined new guest worker program for farm workers. The support included 74 percent of Republicans and 71 percent who identified themselves as strong Tea Party members.

Republicans would clearly be in good company by taking the lead on reforms to help the agricultural industry. Alex Nowrasteh, a Cato Institute policy analyst, recently reminded us that in 1977 Ronald Reagan presciently addressed this issue. He asked: "Are great numbers of our unemployed really victims of the illegal alien invasion, or are those illegal tourists actually doing work our own people won't do?" Mr. Reagan concluded by saying: "One thing is certain in this hungry world, no regulation or law should be allowed if it results in crops rotting in the fields for lack of harvesters."

It seems to me that Reagan's heirs in the Republican Party would do well to understand – as he so clearly did – the importance of immigrant labor for California's vegetable and fruit farms.

Immigrant workers are a blessing to our country, not a burden. But let's make sure they are here legally. Stop playing politics. It's time for immigration reform.

*Tom Nassif is president and CEO of Western Growers.*