

Immigration Reform and the E-verify Challenges to Georgia Agriculture

1. Agriculture is Georgia's largest industry and first industry, with a rich history in the state's economy. The 2009 economic impact was \$68.8 billion and its future holds even more promise. Production capacity has never been stronger, thanks to science, technology, education and favorable market prices. Rural counties stand to benefit most: Two thirds of Georgia's counties rank agriculture as their largest or second largest segment of goods produced.
2. Farms are important: They generate tens of thousands of jobs on and off the farm in communities across the state. Ginners, processors, fertilizer and chemical dealers, dairy operations, forest management, landscapers, packing sheds, equipment dealers, farmers markets and many more businesses created 383,000 jobs in 2009.
3. Georgia growers need an estimated 87,000 workers during peak seasons and these workers can be very hard to find. Federal law requires employers to verify their new hires are legally in this country by completing Employment Eligibility Verification Form I-9. This form requires the employee to produce identification that verifies citizenship, permanent residency or employment authorization. Having enough workers that meet this rigorous threshold can prove to be a challenge for rural businesses at critical periods throughout the year.
4. A state mandate to use the E-verify program would force farmers and other business interests through another layer of government on an already challenged workforce where jobs are often already hard to fill. While Georgia has a 10.4 percent unemployment rate, agribusiness across this state are welcoming the opportunity to add workers every day yet they still go unfilled because many are not willing to accept these jobs.
5. The federal program called H-2A, allows farmers access to a workforce if they can afford the cost, paperwork and bureaucratic red tape. The H-2A Temporary Agricultural Workers program comes with a myriad of federal requirements, including a minimum wage of \$9.12 per hour and free housing, along with a host of other fees and expenses until the work season ends. In addition, the visa database has been dysfunctional since early January and those requesting workers do not know when or if those workers will be available.
6. Because H2A is costly and complicated, just 20 farmers in Georgia use the program, employing about 7,000 foreign workers, or 8 percent of the workers needed. Until this inflexible and expensive program is streamlined for the modern market and Georgia's growing role in the global economy, private sector employers will continue to wrestle with having the workers they need.
7. Any new mandates by state government on private employers will hurt Georgia's rural communities and our state economy. Such efforts will not make for a

stronger Georgia, just a more regulated one. If Georgia policy-makers want true immigration reform with greater accountability for foreign nationals, they should encourage the federal government to evaluate existing programs, then adapt them to accommodate the state's needs.

8. The H2B program is the second temporary, non-immigrant program that can be used by non-agricultural employers, such as landscapers, who need seasonal workers. However, the H-2B visa program is capped at 66,000 visas per year and, because this number has not been adjusted since this visa category was initially enacted in 1990, the cap has been reached every year since 2004. Many employers are therefore unable to access this program once the cap has been reached.
9. Many small employers do not have high-speed internet access, particularly those in rural areas. Small farmers do not have fulltime staff that can access E-verify and the farmer/employer cannot always take the time during peak seasons to perform the necessary tasks him/herself.
10. Check out the 2011 Ag Snapshots provided by the UGA Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development for 2009 economic data related to agricultural production. It is broken out by industry sector and has very useful information and charts. <http://aghost.net/images/e0191701/2011AgSnapshots.pdf>