

Migrant worker ID proposal is a solution in search of a problem

by Norm McAllister

We have a problem: Vermont farmers can't find enough local labor to work their farms. Over the last decade, many farmers have turned to the federal guest worker program fill the gap. But the migrant worker ID program being discussed in the Legislature isn't the right solution.

Proponents claim that, by issuing modified drivers' licenses to foreign guest workers, Vermont will give them more independence and ensure they won't be cut off from food and medical care.

Sure, that's true enough. A driver's license does offer greater independence: ask any 16-year-old. But I can tell you, as a dairy farmer, this really isn't an issue for migrant farm workers.

One of the program's requirements is that the employer provide for the guest worker's housing, which, in most cases, is offered right on the farm. But that doesn't mean that a migrant worker is "tied to the farm," as some have claimed. Those of us in the industry know from firsthand observation that just about every migrant worker has a prepaid cell phone with which they connect with other foreign workers, advocates, and any medical, transportation or other service they might need. So the fact is, migrant workers are not the "near-indentured-servants" that some assume them to be. Furthermore, giving someone a driver's license doesn't buy them a car.

Proponents of the migrant ID program are trying to make a "human rights issue" out of what's really an economic issue. The problem is not that foreign workers are being enslaved; the problem is that farmers are short of help. An effective solution can be found much closer to home, by looking to Vermont's own unemployed.

In November 2012, Vermont had nearly 19,000 people looking for work. Sure, they may not have a farming background; but generally, neither do the guest workers. In any case, it's not rocket science to hook cows up to a milking machine. With a couple of hours of training, almost anyone could do it.

So, rather than fixate on a migrant worker ID program that has had questionable results in other states and doesn't address the true problem, I suggest we offer incentives to put our unemployed back to work on Vermont's farms. A benefit "slope" instead of a "cliff" would be a great start. We keep extending the length of time that individuals can receive unemployment benefits, and we make it an "all or nothing" proposal. You take a job, you lose your benefit. But what if that job (say, working on a farm) pays less than your former office job? No one will take a job at all, much less a manual-labor job they might consider "beneath them", if they have to take a financial hit to do it.

For an agriculture industry that's one of our loudest supporters of "buying local," our farmers sure could use our help to allow them to "hire local."

As the Legislature takes up this issue in the coming session, I hope my fellow lawmakers will keep these points in mind. I look forward to being part of that discussion.

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