WASHINGTON FARMING in an ERA of GLOBALIZATION - THE STORY OF ONE FARMER

By: Larry Jensen, Board Member, Skagit County Farm Bureau
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What is Farm Bureau?

- In the early 1900s, farmers began organizing themselves around local associations they called Farm Bureaus.
- Farm Bureau soon became the voice for agriculture at the local, state, and national levels.
- The purpose of Farm Bureau is to make the business of farming more profitable, and the community a better place to live.
- Today Farm Bureau consists of more than 6.5 million member families across the United States.
Washington Farm Bureau

- A voluntary, grassroots advocacy organization representing the social and economic interests of farm and ranch families at the local, state, and national levels.
- Seeks to gain public support on the issues affecting farm and ranch families.
- Ensure that rural citizens enjoy the same benefits and services as their city cousins (e.g. rural electrification, telephone service, and other goods and services needed to stay competitive).
- Today, consists of 25 county Farm Bureaus across the state.
- Provide a growing range of services to our members, including advocacy, health insurance, banking, workplace safety services, and workers’ comp claims management.
Agriculture in Washington State

- 39,500 farms
- Crops valued at $9.2 billion in 2011
- Ag and food processing together contributes $46 billion (or 13 percent) to the state economy
- Employs 160,000 people. About 60,000 seasonal workers are needed annually.
- More than 300 commodities produced. Second only to California.
- More than $15 billion in food and ag products exported through Washington ports in 2011, the third largest total in the U.S.
Agriculture in King County

- Ag is not just Eastern Washington. It forms the economic backbone of rural Western Washington.
- In King County alone, there are still 1,790 farms.
- $127 million in crop value
- 12,633 food processing jobs
- $6.1 billion in food processing industry gross sales
- This industry contributes to family-wage jobs in transportation and at our ports.
Issues Faced by Farmers

- Farmers face international competition and operate on tight profit margins.
- Farmers have limited ability to pass on higher costs to consumers. We are price takers, not price makers.
- Often one good year finances several mediocre or bad years.
- Labor-intensive agriculture requires a stable seasonal workforce.
- Often there is a lack of American workers to harvest crops.
- Almost all workers are of Hispanic descent, presumably with legal papers to work in the U.S.
Issues (cont.)

- Estimates are that between 50 and 70 percent of workers in ag, construction, and related industries have false documents.

- Employers face continued pressure from the U.S. government to ensure that all workers have the authority to work in the United States.

- Federal audits of I-9s have increased in frequency over the years. These "silent raids" force farmers to dismiss workers who lack work authorization, causing a major disruption for both the employer and the employees.
Issues (cont.)

- More attention has been placed on the E-Verify system in which an employee’s information (such as a SS#) is electronically checked against federal databases for valid work eligibility.

- If the SS# comes up as invalid, the worker is not authorized to work. However, the E-verify system is not perfect (i.e., misspelling of names or wrong entry of numbers may cause problems).
What do farmers do to recruit workers?

- Traditional methods, migratory pattern of workers, word of mouth. But what happens when this fails?
- Go to the Employment Security Department (WorkSource). This option has not been helpful. 2 out of 3 workers sent by ESD were stoned or drunk.
Recruiting workers (cont.)

H-2A visa—Current program not workable for farmers
- Farmers must prove they cannot get workers domestically.
- Program requires significant lead time to get sufficient data, provide required domestic advertisements for labor, and navigate complex bureaucratic process.
- Farmers must make sizeable investments to fulfill program requirements for adequate worker housing and transportation.
- Farmers must guarantee a wage rate to visa workers that is higher than domestic workers.
- The program lacks some flexibility required for seasonal crops and weather-related changes in the growing season.
- Reforms to this program are necessary to ensure that farmers have access to a legal, stable workforce over the next few decades.
Questions before the public

1. Do we want to produce fruits and vegetables?
2. Do we want to export jobs or import workers?
3. If we want to continue to have an agriculture industry, what type of agriculture do we want? Do we want to grow crops that
   A. Require less labor but are machine-intensive (i.e., grains)?
   Or
   B. Require more human labor, such as fruits (berries, apples, etc.) and vegetables (broccoli, asparagus, etc.)?
4. Do we want to get out of farming altogether?