

Reaping What We Sow

Now is the Season for Immigration Reform

Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho

We all relish the bounty of our fertile farmlands. Scarcity is not a dish commonly served on the tables of this country, where produce is generally plentiful.

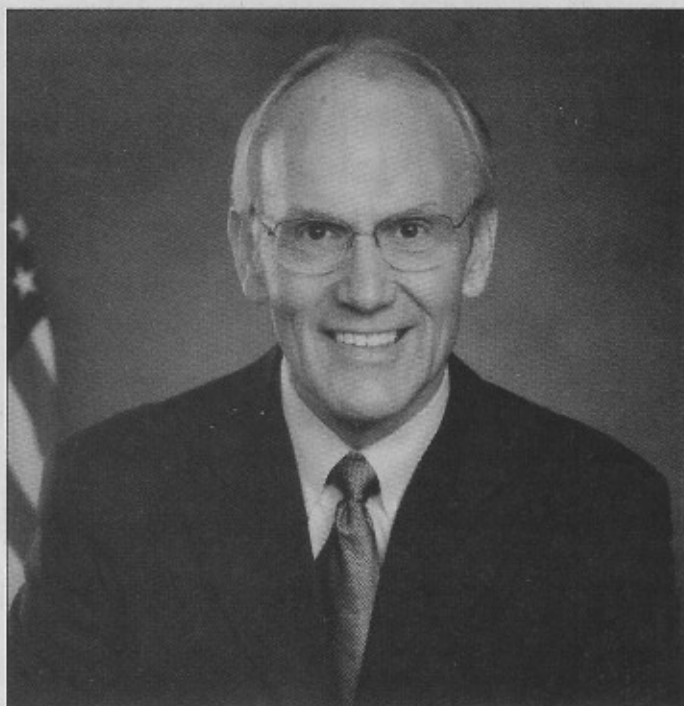
But most Americans seldom think about the sowing and reaping process behind this, and the many months between one action and the other. Even fewer probably think about the backbreaking work under the sun day after day during harvest season.

The majority of people performing this labor are immigrants—Hispanic undocumented immigrants, to be more precise. Of the nation's 1.6 million agricultural workers, the government estimates more than half are not legally authorized to be here. But realistically, the number could be higher than 75 percent.

This is the reason why I drafted and am working to pass legislation reconciling our needs with their needs. I have advocated for farm worker immigration reform for years because I recognize these foreign nationals provide a service that has kept our soil productive, our supermarkets stocked and our stomachs full.

This is not about empathy. It is about economic necessity.

Every day we are getting closer to that 2010 date when the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts this nation will have a shortfall of 10 million workers. But



agriculture is already feeling the loss.

On a visit to Capitol Hill, Luawanna Hallstrom, who represents one of the largest tomato producers in the country, reported a growing crisis in finding workers, and told members of Congress, "We are losing crops as I speak!" Difficulties getting legal workers during the peak season of 2004 cost her farm \$2.5 million.

California raisin growers say availability of workers was down 60 percent last

year. Berry, grape and pepper growers, who used to turn workers away, don't know where they have disappeared. The story repeats itself on Oregon tree farms, Washington state apple orchards and Florida orange groves.

Border control is working. And yes, we need security. But we have to enable people who want to work to keep doing so, because we need those workers as well. There are two sides to the same coin. Both border control measures and a

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guest worker program have to be in place to minimize the impact on the country's agriculture industry.

We cannot forget that our workforce is growing older and getting ready to retire. The oldest of the baby boomers will begin to retire in 2011. The Bureau of Labor Statistics cites farmers on the top 10 most likely to be affected when boomers stop working.

More than 78 million people make up this generation of individuals born between 1946 and 1964. Who will replace them when they stop working? The nation's unemployment rate is 4.6 percent, which means pretty much everyone who can work is working already. This massive retirement will in all likelihood affect the country's economic growth, unless we do something about it.

Labor shortages mean losses for businesses, higher costs for customers and sacrifices to our standard of living. It would be short-sighted to allow our immigration policies to increase, rather than relieve, those pending shortages.

U.S. agriculture must speak now, and loudly, to make sure Congress enacts a workable, affordable temporary worker program. When it comes to comprehensive immigration reform, it's clear what season we're in. If we don't sow now, there will be nothing to reap tomorrow.