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Agriculture groups call for immigration reform

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PORTLAND - The Coalition for a Working Oregon rolled out a sobering report on the impact of strict implementation of the federal "no-match" rule at a press conference here July 9.

A strict implementation of the rule, which is on hold pending the outcome of a legal appeal, would reduce the state's annual production of goods and services by more than \$17 billion and cost the state more than 170,000 jobs, said the report's author, Oregon State University economist William Jaeger.

The coalition of labor-dependent industry organizations commissioned the report. Jaeger said the coalition in no way influenced his findings.

The coalition formed last August with the intent of presenting Congress with a unified message on the need for comprehensive immigration reform.

A patchwork of state approaches to addressing illegal immigration will not provide a solution to immigration issues, said Kathy LaCompte of Brooks Tree Farm in Brooks, Ore.

"It will lead to additional problems," she said.

LaCompte said the current situation surrounding farm labor is not workable.

Banks are hesitant to lend farms money given the uncertainty of the future of the U.S. labor force, she said, and farms are hesitant to invest in new equipment.

"We need a federal solution," she said.

Bill Perry, government affairs director for the Oregon Restaurant Association, opened the press conference by saying: "The problem has gotten out of control. It's gotten so deep, we figure something has to be done."

Jeff Stone, government affairs director for the Oregon Association of Nurseries, said one reason comprehensive immigration reform is hard to achieve is because the issue is volatile.

"It's an emotionally charged issue," Stone said. "Just like abortion and gun control, it has a vitriolic reaction among folks."

Stone went on to say: "The time is here and now for us to stand up and be the reasoned voice in this debate."

LaCompte, one of three farmers to speak at the press conference, said she had expected Jaeger's report would show that a strict implementation of the "No-Match" rule would significantly harm Oregon's economy. The final numbers, however, surprised even her.

"We knew it would be a pretty big effect, and it wouldn't be a pretty picture," she said. "But we didn't expect it to be this big."

"The last thing we need is to have this kind of impact on our business," she said.

"We have one chance each year to make it happen, to pay our bills for the whole year," said Tom McNabb of Yule Tree Farms in Aurora, Ore. "If the labor is not there to make it happen, we don't get to make it happen."

"We have the opportunity to lose everything if the labor is not there," he said.

"We have to have a labor force," said Don Schellenberg, an associate director of government affairs for the Oregon Farm Bureau. "We have to have a legal labor force."

The coalition represents the construction industry, food processors, nurseries, Christmas tree farms, dairies, wheat growers, winegrape growers and lodging. In all, 22 Oregon organizations are members.

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