

# 'Reports of ICE checkpoints and sweeps are false'

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are making tough choices, based on quality and volume, of which orchards to pick and which to pass over.

In Idaho, grower Duane Grant, of Rupert, used to get two applications for every seasonal job opening on his large, diversified farm. Now he gets so few applications he's joined a growing number of farmers who turn to foreign guestworkers.

In Oregon, the demand for farmworkers is outpacing the workforce, Kevin Chambers, owner of Koosah Farm in Amity, Ore., told a recent immigration summit.

"What we have is a relatively fixed pool of laborers, and a growing need," he said. "We're planting more acres of grapes, hazelnuts — there is greater demand for labor."

Across the Pacific Northwest and California, finding enough labor for tree fruit, berries, hops — any labor-intensive crop — is heavy on the minds of growers, packers, shippers and marketers. It's magnified, several said, because fewer people are apparently illegally crossing the U.S.-Mexican border to do farm work and by media hype of the Trump administration's deportation of illegal immigrants, which heightens fear among some workers.

Rose Richeson, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement spokeswoman in Seattle, said the biggest difference in the ICE arrest policy under the Trump administration is that no category of individuals in violation of immigration laws is excluded from possible enforcement action. In the past, some were not a priority, she said.

Illegal immigrants who are convicted criminals or a security risk are the priority targets for arrest, and the number of them arrested has risen substantially, she said. Non-criminal illegal immigrants, while not a target, may also be arrested, though in the past that was less likely, Richeson said.

She said the rumors surrounding ICE's activities are inaccurate.

"Reports of ICE checkpoints and sweeps are false, dangerous and irresponsible," she said. "Any groups falsely reporting such activities are doing a disservice to those they claim to support."

Another big factor in the labor shortage is the red-hot economy in places such as Ida-



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Workers at the Spanish Castle Vineyard south of Rock Island, Wash., on May 17. While some farmers are short workers this year, others say they have enough.

ho. Though the labor pool there continues to grow, new and expanding processing and manufacturing plants are tapping the labor pool and pushing the state unemployment rate to 3.3 percent, a level economists label full employment.

Oregon also has a tight labor market, with a 3.7 percent preliminary unemployment rate for April, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. California has a 4.8 percent unemployment rate and Washington state's is 4.6 percent.

## No. 1 issue

"The No. 1 issue in the industry right now is labor. It really is. I would say there's a general feeling of greater intensity and concern on labor than in a number of years," says Chuck Zeutenhorst, general manager of First Fruits Marketing of Washington, in Yakima.

"There has been so much negative press and misinformation and fake news about (President Donald Trump's) real policies, and unfortunately that drives fear into people," Zeutenhorst said.

There's a lot of angst about Trump rounding up illegal immigrants who have committed serious crimes but former President Barack Obama deported 2 million illegal immigrants, he said.

"We hope the Trump administration comes up with a thoughtful immigration policy that works," Zeutenhorst said. "We haven't had a positive one for the past eight years."

First Fruits markets for Broetje Orchards and two other producers. Broetje operates more than 5,000 acres in the Tri-Cities area of southeastern Washington. It's one of the largest companies that relies

solely on domestic labor without using the H-2A visa foreign guestworker program.

Many large Washington tree fruit companies do rely on H-2A workers, estimated to reach 15,000 this year. The program is expensive, requiring employers to pay at least \$13.38 per hour, and provide housing and transportation between the farm and the worker's country of origin, usually Mexico.

Broetje employs about 2,200 workers for picking and packing cherries and about 4,000 for the apple harvest. It's too early to know whether the company will have enough this year, Zeutenhorst said.

Broetje pays well and takes care of its workers but some day may have to turn to H-2A, he said.

August and September will be stressful, he said, because the harvests of apples, grapes and hops will all compete for the same workers.

Stemilt Growers of Wenatchee, Wash., one of the largest cherry packers with operations in Wenatchee and California, last season needed 1,500 workers for two Wenatchee cherry packing plants for double shifts at season peak.

This year, the harvest will likely be spread over more days so fewer people will be needed, said West Mathison, Stemilt president.

Mathison said he was concerned a month ago, but now has recruited 80 percent of the people he needs and has three weeks to recruit the rest.

"With our good employee facilities, our free health care clinic and long season we feel we will be able to recruit enough good people. With near record low unemployment, we

know it will be tight," Mathison said.

Several Washington growers who rely on domestic workers said they won't know the severity of any labor shortage in cherries until the latter half of June.

Several others said there is a labor shortage but that they have enough domestic workers because they pay well or provide housing, or both, and generally treat their workers well.

## Recruiting continues

Brenda Thomas is president of Orchard View Farms, The Dalles, Ore. With about 2,400 acres, Orchard View is the largest cherry grower in Oregon. The company is doing OK so far, recruiting online with many workers planning to return after making good money there last season, she said.

"We don't want anything happening between now and harvest with any fake news," Thomas said, adding that it creates fear.

There's a different feel, a fear of the unknown by employee and employer, she said, from perceptions about deportation when "they won't look at your immigration (status) unless they pull you over for another crime."

There is a shortage, she said, because there are no extra people anymore looking for work.

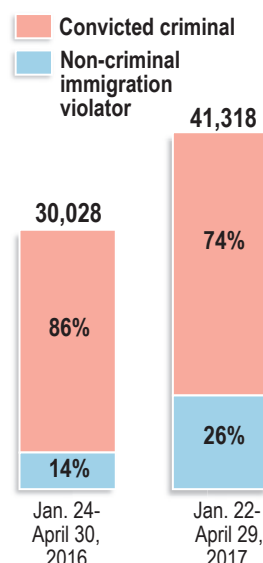
Orchard View Farms does well without H-2A, she said, because it provides housing for workers, pays well on piece rates averaging \$20 per hour, has a good work environment and a long season.

"We want to be the preferred choice for work," Thomas said. The company peaks at about 1,100 workers for picking and

## ICE removals under President Trump

100 days since President Trump signed executive orders outlining immigration enforcement priorities, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) arrests of known or suspected illegal immigrants increased more than 37 percent over the same period in 2016.

Source: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement  
Alan Kenaga/Capital Press



packing, she said.

"Over 80 percent of our workers come from communities in California where their kids go to school. They come up and work and count on our cherry harvest to fill their gap in California harvests," she said.

Keith Middleton, of Middleton Six Sons Farms, Pasco, Wash., said he has 130 workers, all he needs, at midway through asparagus harvest with a month to go.

"We're just a mile out of Pasco, have some of the newest varieties, clean fields and are one of the top-paying farms around," he said. He pays pickers 25 to 30 cents per pound.

A couple of months ago there was a lot of concern about ICE but that's died down, Middleton said.

Wade Wolfe, winemaker at Thurston Wolfe Winery, Prosser, Wash., said even smaller vineyards are turning to mechanized harvesting to reduce their labor needs. Grape harvest overlaps apple harvest and workers go for apples because it pays more, he said. The apple competition gets more challenging each year, he said, adding that the labor shortage is about the same or slightly worse this year.

Tye Fleming, owner of Helios Nursery in Quincy, Wash., said he ran 20 workers short all last year and has enough right now, but that there's a definite overall shortage, with workers jumping around to whoever pays the most. Tree fruit nursery work is tougher, with lots of bending over and no shade, so orchard work wins out, he said.

He sees no change in the trend of a shrinking labor pool so his goal is to reduce his payroll by 40 percent in five years with more mechanization.

"H-2A labor would cost

me \$16 per hour by the time I house and transport them and the sales price of our product doesn't support that cost," he said.

John Baile, assistant orchard manager of Auvil Fruit Co. in Orondo, Wash., said the company needs 400 workers in its cherry and apple orchards on 2,220 acres. He's able to get them domestically by paying good wages, he said, but may have to consider joining the other growers who use H-2A as the domestic labor force remains static.

As in many states, some growers in Idaho have turned to H-2A workers to fill jobs.

Grant, the Rupert, Idaho, grower, has to cover his shortage of workers with H-2A guestworkers. The most current U.S. Department of Labor data, for Fiscal Year 2014, shows Idaho had 2,080 certified H-2A workers, representing 1.78 percent of the total U.S. pool.

He has been getting H-2A workers from Mexico, but he believes fewer Mexican workers are interested in working in the U.S. due to that country's improving economy, smaller family sizes and new opportunities in other sectors.

Grant acknowledges there's a risk some of his full-time employees may seek to upgrade to better jobs that are becoming available, and he's steadily increased wages to remain competitive.

"Our wages as a line-item expense have grown much faster than the value of the products we sell," Grant said. "Wages have been the most consistently growing line-item in our budget."

Reporters Tim Hearden, John O'Connell and Eric Mortenson contributed to this story.

# Trial will likely be scheduled in the next six to nine months

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farms with junior rights. The case, which was originally tossed from federal court, will proceed in Umatilla County Circuit Court after Judge Michael Gillespie denied the district's motion to dismiss last week.

A trial will likely be scheduled in the next six to nine months, according to Westland board chairman Bob Levy. And though Levy said he is confident the district will prevail, he felt it was unfair for patrons to invest in the project up front only to have it potentially stalled by legal challenges.

"The district is looking to

defend this litigation for months to come," Levy explained to a room full of patrons who packed the Umatilla County Fire District 1 station on Westland Road. "If the plaintiffs are successful ... it disturbs the Central Project, and the Central Project will not work."

The Central Project would have cost roughly \$14.4 million, financed by patrons who agreed to buy the water. The state of Oregon also approved a funding package for water delivery projects during the 2015 Legislature, with \$11 million earmarked for the basin.

However, according to the resolution passed Monday, the project as it was conceived de-

pendent on Westland's "long-standing water delivery and distribution practices" that are now being challenged in court. Plaintiffs in the case argue the district is in violation of Oregon's "first in time, first in right" water appropriation system.

Levy also said the lawsuit precluded Westland from applying for its share of state funding within the fixed time frame.

After reading over the resolution in silence, farmer Hoss Hodges, whose parents arrived in the district in 1968, could barely contain his frustration.

"This really interferes with our future," Hodges said after

slamming the table with his hand.

Others were more subdued while lamenting what they described as a lost opportunity.

"We damn sure needed that Columbia River water," said Butch Shockman, who owns a small amount of land along Bridge Road in Hermiston.

The value of agricultural land in the Columbia Basin increases exponentially with irrigation. Without water, dryland crops such as wheat may yield around \$100 per acre. Add one acre-foot of water and that value grows to \$500 per acre; add three acre-feet, and the value rockets to \$5,000 per acre.

Patty Horn, whose family

has owned Butter Creek Ranch in the district since the 1960s, said she is worried that without sufficient water in the future, her son will eventually inherit a sandlot.

"If I lose my water, my land become worthless," Horn said. "It took 30 years for us to get a shot at Columbia water. It's a shame to see it go over a few suing the district."

The lawsuit in question was filed by a group of patrons who, together, farm more than 1,650 acres with senior water rights that date back to 1903. They claim they are being cheated out of water to benefit three large farms with more than 5,000 acres, including Levy's

L&L Farms, Amstad Farms and Eagle Ranch, to the tune of \$2.9 million in damages.

Dixie Echeverria, who owns ELH LLC and is one of the plaintiffs on the case, said in a written statement that they have "grave concerns" about the management of the district. In his ruling, Gillespie encouraged both sides to consider mediation.

"This case is not this court's first experience with a small district's members suing the special district they are members of," Gillespie wrote. "In very real terms, the district's costs are borne directly by all of its members in one way or another."

# 'I would appreciate a visit over a tailgate, not a social media campaign'

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"We don't design management plans," Arp said. "This clearly is a county issue, the county has authority. They're the ones who have to approve the plan."

"It's an interesting example of the issues around co-existence," Arp said.

At a Sherman County Court hearing last week in the local high school gym, Azure Farms principals David and Nathan Stelzer presented a plan to control Rush Skeleton, Canada Thistle, White Top and Bindweed growing on their 1,922-acre farm on the outskirts of Moro, the county seat. An estimated 300 people attended, more than one-sixth the county's population.

The county court had

warned it would ask the Oregon Department of Agriculture to quarantine the farm if it did not control its weeds. Other farmers, especially those who grow certified wheat, don't want weed seeds spreading from Azure Farms to contaminate their crops.

Tim Butler, who manages the ODA's noxious weed program, said the ag department supports Sherman County's action. "Our mission is to protect Oregon's natural resource and agricultural economy from invasive, noxious weeds," he said. "These things have impact directly on ag."

"I think Sherman County is doing the right thing for the right reasons, for sure," Butler said.

He said a quarantine for

weeds has been used only one time in Oregon that he recalls. The weed management plan submitted by Azure Farms "still needs some work" but is on the right track, Butler said.

"That's where the weed scientists at OSU can provide some insight," he said. "I think they can get there."

The Stelzers, who are brothers, proposed a variety of methods, including deep tillage, mowing, increased crop rotation, over-application of fertilizer and application of such things as boron, salt and citrus pulp mulch. Nathan Stelzer is the farm manager; David Stelzer is CEO of Azure Standard in Dufur, Ore., which distributes organic products.

Bryan Cranston, who grows certified wheat next to

Azure Farms, said he hopes the Stelzers, neighboring farmers and county officials can find a solution that works for everyone. "I don't want them to lose organic certification, I don't," he said.

But Cranston also said the time for experimental weed control methods has passed. He believes the only way to control Rush Skeleton weed in particular is with the herbicide Milestone, which is not certified for use on organic operations.

Like many in the county, Cranston was angry the farm used social media to rally customers and organic activists to its side. County officials received approximately 57,000 emails, many from people who angrily denounced the county for what the senders charac-

terized as threatening to poison the farm with herbicides. The county courthouse had to shut down its phone system, because it was overwhelmed. Some critics invoked the specter of Monsanto, which had no discernible role in the matter.

During the Sherman County Court session, Cranston and others made it clear they didn't appreciate it.

"Noxious weeds spread the same way something is viral on Facebook," he said during the hearing. "I would appreciate a visit over a tailgate, not a social media campaign."

During the meeting, David Stelzer apologized for taking the issue to social media.

Speaking this week, Cranston said weeds from Azure have been a problem for 10 years, and he's frustrated

many people are acting like the problem was discovered only recently. He hopes the county will supervise Azure's progress on its weed management plan, and he believes the organic farm should pay for it.

Willamette Valley farmer Marie Bowers, who grows grass seed and turnip seed, also said co-existence between farmers is the key issue. In her case, she has a turnip field next to wine grapes. She and the vineyard operator notify each other when they need to spray, for example, and time their work so it doesn't harm the other.

"You want to be respectful of your neighbor, you want to work together," she said. "That's part of what we do in Oregon: We check with each other."