

Immigration woes taking toll on U.S. economy

By **CAROL RYAN DUMAS**
Capital Press

A labor shortage is causing hardships across the U.S. farm economy, and the administration and Congress need to pass comprehensive immigration reform to help alleviate the problem, panelists said during a virtual press conference.

"This issue of immigration is important right now, especially with the labor shortages that we have that are causing, of course, shortages in products and services ... especially now with the highest level of inflation in 40 years," said Daniel Garza, president of the LIBRE Initiative.

The major driver is 10 million unfilled jobs, including acute shortage of workers in the dairy sector.

"So even though we have low unemployment numbers, it doesn't tell the full story," he said.

The U.S. lost 2 million new immigrant workers in 2020 alone due to pandemic slowdowns, and immigrants with work visas have been losing their jobs due to massive backlogs in the federal government's renewal system, he said.

"It's caused these massive ripple effects across our economy, and it is impacting the everyday lives of Americans," he said.

The panelists spoke about the labor shortages in health care, construction, hospitality, high-tech industries, transportation and agriculture and the critical roles immigrants play in those sectors.

The Jan. 26 event was organized by the National Immigration Forum and the LIBRE Initiative, which promotes free enterprise and opportunity for members of the Hispanic community.

On the farming front, Rick Naerebout, CEO of the Idaho Dairyman's Association, said 90% of dairy farm workers in Idaho are foreign-born.

"Because the dairy indus-

try is a year-round employer, we don't have access to the H-2A program or any other visa programs. ... That speaks a lot to what the legal status is going to be of our average dairy farm worker," he said.

In 2012 — the last time Idaho dairy producers would have said their dairies were fully staffed — there were more than 8,000 employees. Today, there are less than 5,000.

In addition, Idaho is milking 100,000 more cows than the 550,000 head it had in 2012, he said.

"So we're seeing our industry continue to grow but that workforce shrink," he said.

There are not enough workers to fill jobs, and some sort of immigration reform is needed to fill that, he said.

"The end result is that's causing small businesses to go out," he said.

Idaho went from 560 dairy farm families in 2012 to 400 today, he said.

"So we've lost a number of small businesses, and labor shortages is one of those pressure points that caused that," he said.

Idaho dairy producers would look to the Farm Workforce Modernization Act as a reasonable, bipartisan solution to the problem, he said.

The bill provides temporary status for certified agricultural workers, their spouses and children and optional earned legal status for long-time workers.

The bill passed the U.S. House, and dairy producers hope it can move forward in the Senate, he said.

The bill was negotiated between employers and those that represent the employees, he said.

"Everybody had a seat at the table in trying to negotiate that bill, and we see it as a very reasonable way forward. And we're hopeful that we can see something move in the Senate," he said.

Water users in Idaho's central mountains OK terms of management agreement

By **BRAD CARLSON**
Capital Press

Idaho Department of Water Resources staff told the state Water Resource Board Jan. 21 that 10 organizations OK'd terms of an agreement that paves the way for developing a groundwater management plan for part of the central mountains.

Users in the Big Wood and Little Wood Basins experienced a second straight low water year in 2021. Water Resources Director Gary Spackman last May initiated an administrative proceeding covering water rights.

Last summer's settlement among groundwater users and holders of senior surface water rights, reached with help from state leaders, applied to the 2021 irrigation season only. If the new agreement is made final, it would apply for three years and then be revisited.

State law prioritizes senior rights during water shortages. Snowpack so far this year is 120% of normal in the Big Wood Basin and 128% in the Little Wood Basin, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service reported Jan. 24.

The agreement's terms include detailed water management practices within the Big Wood River Ground Water Management Area and the Wood River watershed, the board said in a release.

A draft groundwater management plan must be finished and presented to the Big Wood River Ground Water Management Area Advisory Committee for review and recommendations. Spackman would have to review and adopt a final plan.

"This has been a hard task to get done," Water Resource Board member Dean Steven-

son of Rupert said. Terms of the agreement include reducing groundwater use; maintaining river flows at a targeted level; limiting the groundwater season of use for irrigation; and creating a conservation, infrastructure and efficiency fund.

The Big Wood & Little Wood Water Users Association would deliver water each year to senior right holders. Amounts differ for each river. The Galena Ground Water District would acquire the water, which on the Big Wood River would be covered by the fund.

Terms on the Little Wood River include a streamflow target May 1-Sept. 30 at a station near Richfield.

The term sheet calls for participating groundwater districts to fallow irrigated farmland to achieve annual or baseline levels of reduced groundwater use. Galena and South Valley groundwater districts would fallow different amounts.

Groundwater districts would carry out additional usage reductions in drought years as determined by snowpack and streamflow levels.

The agreement calls for contributions to the new fund — \$210,000 a year shared by users and the state Water Resource Board — to help finance conservation or infrastructure projects, and pay for some delivery of stored water.

An equal number of surface water and groundwater users, and a board representative, would be on the fund's committee. It would make decisions, reviewed and approved by the Water Resource Board, on projects and stored-water purchases. The agreement proposes the Wood River Resource Conservation & Development Council hold and administer the funds.

Artificial intelligence robot could help breeders develop mildew-resistant vines

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**
Capital Press

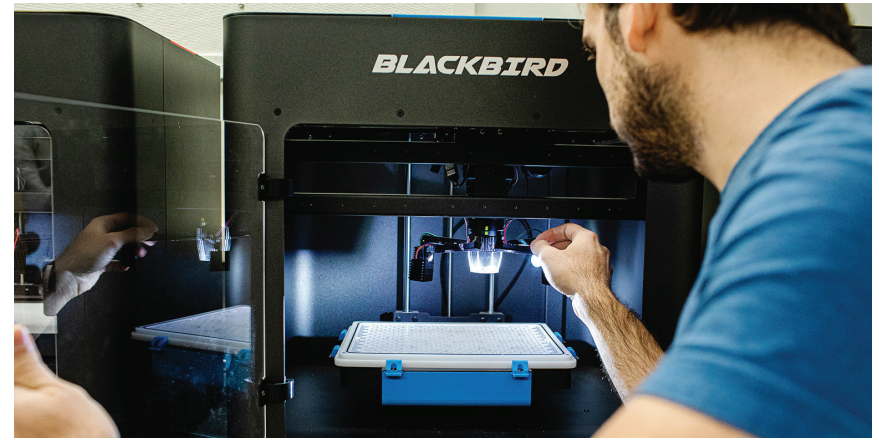
ITHACA, N.Y. — Researchers have developed a robotic artificial intelligence system that could advance the development of disease-resistant crops, including mildew-resistant grapevine varieties.

The "BlackBird" robotic system, named after a military spy plane, replaces microscopes and months of human labor in analyzing mildew lab samples and makes it faster to identify which grapevines carry favorable genetic characteristics for mildew resistance.

Developing mildew-resistant vines is a big deal for the worldwide grape industry, which annually loses billions of dollars to powdery mildew in lost fruit and fungicide costs.

"(Powdery mildew) is a problem everywhere in the world that grapes are grown," said Lance Cadle-Davidson, research pathologist with USDA's Agricultural Research Service and adjunct associate professor in Cornell's School of Integrative Plant Science. He co-leads the BlackBird project.

He said having resistant varieties



Allison Usavage/Cornell University

Dani Martinez makes adjustments to BlackBird, a robot that may aid in the creation of new, disease-resistant crops.

could lead to 90% less pesticide use per variety.

Before the BlackBird was invented, studying mildew resistance in vines was tedious.

The process involved breeders collecting leaf samples, then researchers spending hours hunched over microscopes manually scanning for mildew infection. This would take two or more months.

Now, that same work can be done by BlackBird in a single day, thanks to engineer and computer scientist Yu Jiang, assistant professor in Cornell's School of Integrative Plant Science.

Breeders collect leaf samples from vines and send them into Jiang and Cadle-Davidson's lab. The researchers punch 1-centimeter disks out of the leaves and arrange them on a tray,

then infect samples. BlackBird automatically scans the leaves using an algorithm similar to facial recognition software that Jiang programmed to recognize mildew's spores and fine threads.

The robot can gather information at a scale equivalent to the resolution of a regular optical microscope, with even higher accuracy.

"In plain language, we tried to create a tool that replaces the most laborious part of this research study," said Jiang.

The software helps researchers identify phenotypes, or visible traits, of vines that carry more favorable genetic characteristics for mildew resistance.

Breeders can use this genetic information to develop mildew-resistant varieties.

House panel supports creating CAFO improvement fund

By **BRAD CARLSON**
Capital Press

BOISE — The Idaho House Resources & Conservation Committee Jan. 31 sent to the House floor a proposal to help pay for water quality improvement projects at confined animal feeding operations across the state.

House Bill 466 would make a one-time appropriation of \$5 million from the state general fund to start a water quality improvement fund.

Gov. Brad Little's pro-

posed budget includes a one-time cash transfer of \$20 million from the general fund to the Agricultural Best Management Practices Fund. That money would focus on non-point-source projects, which address pollutants that do not come from a single identified source. Requests in recent years far exceeded available funding.

HB 466 would use \$5 million of that \$20 million to start the fund for confined animal feeding operations.

The Idaho Dairyman's Association said the federal

Clean Water Act defines confined animal feeding operations as point sources, so they are not eligible for help from other sources.

The association expects the \$5 million to fund 15-20 projects over 18 months. It envisions 60% of the costs to come from the fund and rest from producers. A committee would select projects and determine the funding level.

Committee members voted to send HB466 to the full House with a do-pass recommendation. An alternative proposal with stricter

guidelines did not pass.

House Majority Leader Mike Moyle, R-Star, a committee member, supported the alternative motion. He told Capital Press the concept is good, but it would be better to spell out more in statute so the program relies less on Department of Environmental Quality rule making.

Dairy and cattle industries "are at the table trying to make a difference," Rep. Laurie Lickley, R-Jerome, committee vice chairman and the bill's sponsor, said at the hearing.

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