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OUR VIEW

Agriculture copes with a growing labor shortage

“Labor is the No. 1 issue in agriculture.”
Ask a farmer, orchardist, nursery or dairy operator, packer or processor — anyone who hires full-time or seasonal farmworkers, and most will tell you they are worried about labor.

For them, labor is the make-or-break factor of this year — and every other year, for that matter.

The supply of labor is one of the many factors they do not control. Even in areas where the labor pool has remained steady the need for farmworkers has continued to grow as production increases.

For decades the farm labor supply has depended on an array of factors, including federal immigration policy and enforcement. Over the years, many farmworkers have arrived in the U.S. illegally. Whether that happened 20 years ago or last week, it means that getting a job legally in the U.S. is problematic. Many farmers are forced to accept workers’ documentation with the realization that it may not be valid.

That puts farmers between the proverbial rock and a hard place. They need to get their crops harvested and packed, but they are on the hook if an employee does not have adequate documentation.

Without legal status, those workers are in limbo. It is up to Congress to come up with a way to do that, but members of that august body seem about as eager to fix the system as they are to lick an electric fence. Doing that will take political courage, which appears to be an oxymoron these days in the U.S. Capitol.

But the unemployment rate appears to be the primary driver that farmers don’t control. When the unemployment rate is low, as it is now across the West, the pool of farmworkers is smaller because other jobs are available that pay better, offer benefits and are more stable. This is not a matter of immigration

policy so much as economics.

The saving grace for agriculture has been the H-2A guestworker program. It provides a temporary visa to foreign workers. Farmers pay for round-trip transportation between the workers’ home country and the farm, housing and good pay. When the job is over they return to their homes.

This year Washington farmers will bring in 15,000 guestworkers from Mexico and other countries, and California will bring in 11,000. Farmers in other states also depend on H-2A workers.

The downside of the H-2A program: It is limited to temporary workers. Some sectors of agriculture, such as dairy farms and processing plants, need full-time,

year-round employees.

Under the Trump administration, the H-2A program seems to be working better than under the previous administration, which seemed bent on slowing down the paperwork and causing as much consternation as possible.

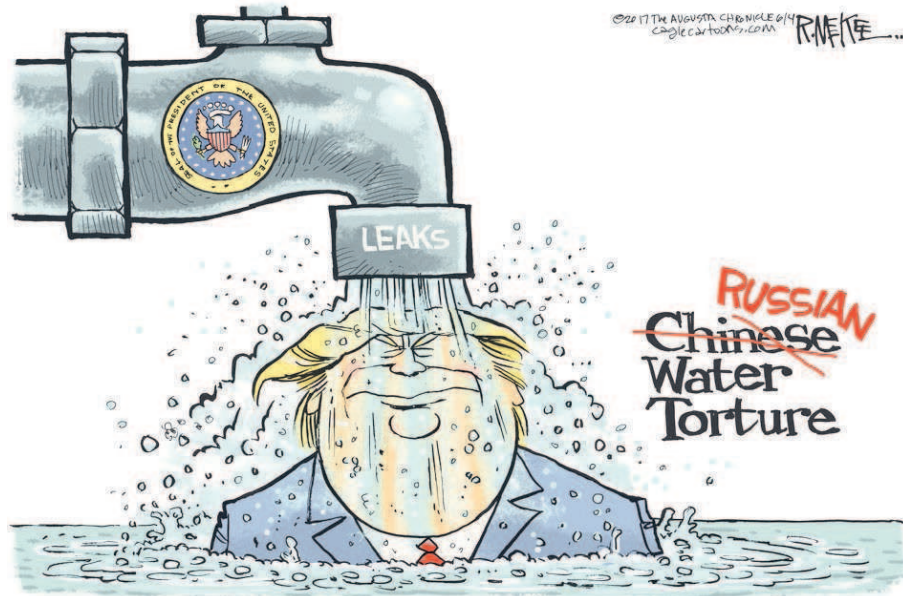
Mechanization and automation represent another bright spot for some farmers. They are buying picking platforms to increase the speed and efficiency of tree fruit harvests, many dairies have installed robotic milkers that reduce the need for labor, berry and grape growers use mechanical harvesters and researchers continue to work on robotic harvesters for nearly every other crop.

The labor predicament leaves farmers and others with three options: Wait for the economy to slow down so unemployment increases, wait for Congress to get cracking on immigration reform, or the administration and Congress can further streamline the H-2A program so farmers can obtain more guestworkers in a timely and affordable manner.

None of the three developments seems particularly likely any time soon.

It is up to Congress, but members of that august body seem about as eager to fix the system as they are to lick an electric fence.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of publisher Kathryn Brown, managing editor Daniel Wattenburger, and opinion page editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.



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OTHER VIEWS

Neither hot nor cold on climate

Like a lot of conservatives who write about public policy, my views on climate change place me in the ranks of what the British writer Matt Ridley once dubbed the “lukewarmers.”

Lukewarmers accept that the earth is warming and that our civilization’s ample CO2 emissions are a major cause. They doubt, however, that climate change represents a crisis unique among the varied challenges we face, or that the global regulatory schemes advanced to deal with it will work as advertised. And they raise an eyebrow at the contrast between the apocalyptic, absolutist rhetoric with which these schemes are regularly defended and their actual details, which seem mostly designed to enable the globe’s statesmen to greenwash the pursuit of economic and political self-interest.

More specifically, lukewarmers look at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s official projections and see a strong likelihood that rising temperatures will drag on GDP without leading to catastrophe. They look at the record of climatological predictions and see a pattern in which observed warming hugs the lower, non-disastrous end of the spectrum of projections. And they look at the substance of the Paris accord, which papered over a failed attempt to set binding emission rules with a set of fine-sounding promises, and see little to justify all the anguish and despair over Donald Trump’s decision to abandon it.

The despairing are unlikely to be convinced by this quick description, so for a better sense of the lukewarmist case, I recommend two recent essays by Oren Cass of the Manhattan Institute: First, “The Problem With Climate Catastrophizing,” from Foreign Affairs, and second, “How to Worry About Climate Change,” from National Affairs.

But while inviting readers to ease their pain over Paris with the balm of lukewarmism, I also want to concede two problems with this approach. The first is that no less than alarmism, lukewarmism can be vulnerable to cherry-picking and selection bias, reaching for any piece of evidence — and when you’re dealing with long-term trends, there’s a lot of evidence to choose from — that supports its non-catastrophic assumptions, even if the bulk of the data starts to point the other way.

This means that every lukewarmer, including especially those in positions of political authority, should be pressed to identify trends that would push them toward greater alarmism and a sharper focus on the issue.

I’ll answer that challenge myself: My own alarm over climate change has gone up modestly since the Obama-era cap-and-trade debates, as the decade or more in which observed warming was slow or even flat — the much-contested warming “pause” — has



ROSS DOUTHAT
Comment

given way to a clearer rise in global temperatures.

If you chart this spike against the range of climate change projections, it brings the trend up into the middle of climatologists’ scenarios for the first time in some years. Maybe that will be temporary and it will fall back. But the closer the real trend gets to the worst-case projections, the more my lukewarmism will look Pollyannish and require substantial reassessment.

But this is where the second objection to lukewarmism comes in, which is that such reassessment might happen on op-ed pages but not in actual right-wing politics, because in actual right-wing politics no serious assessment of the science and the risks is taking place to begin with. Instead there’s just a mix of business-class and blue-collar self-interest and a trollish, “If liberals are for it, we’re against it” anti-intellectualism. So while lukewarmers may fancy ourselves serious interlocutors for liberals, we’re actually just running interference on behalf of know-nothing and do-nothingism, attacking flawed policies on behalf of a Republican Party that will never, ever advance any policies of its own.

This critique is ... not necessarily wrong. A Republican Party that was really shaped by lukewarmism would probably still oppose the Paris deal and shrink from sweeping carbon taxes. But it would be actively debating and budgeting for the two arenas — innovation and mitigation — where the smartest skeptics of regulatory solutions tend to place their faith.

This is not what the GOP seems inclined to do. Instead it lets lukewarmers poke holes in liberal proposals for climate insurance policies, and then sits back satisfied that no insurance policy, no extra effort, is necessary at all.

Earlier I recommended reading Oren Cass’ essays; now I’ll quote his tweet when Trump pulled out of the Paris accord. “Hopefully someday,” he wrote, “we’ll get a reality-based climate agreement that helps prepare for and adapt to whatever climate change brings.”

The problem is that while Paris was not sufficiently rooted in reality, the anti-Paris sentiments that moved Trump weren’t entirely reality-based either. And a clear Republican plan for how to “prepare for and adapt to whatever climate change brings” does not actually exist.

In its absence, lukewarmism is a critique without an affirmative agenda, a theory of the case without a party that’s prepared to ever act on it. So its claim to offer a fully-credible policy alternative to climate alarmism awaits a different president, and a very different GOP.

Ross Douthat joined *The New York Times* as an Op-Ed columnist in April 2009. Previously, he was a senior editor at *The Atlantic*.

YOUR VIEWS

Measure 11 needs reform, not repeal

I wrote a letter to every senator and representative asking why they do not have the courage, after being voted in to make the hard choices and the right ones, to reform Measure 11. I was told that they are “scared” of looking soft on crime. So it goes on we have towards in the legislature that allow the DAs to have total control over the legal system, allow them to fill the prisons full with totally inappropriate lengths of time for incarceration.

Let me be clear, I am NOT soft on crime. I believe that violent and repeat offenders, as M11 was designed for, need to be punished. There are currently 6,129 inmates in under M11, almost half the prison population, at a cost of \$211,516,386 per year, not counting medical at \$94.55 per day.

We need not repeal, at this time, but reform M11 to allow first-time offenders a second look after they have served half their time. If you even took 30 percent of the M11-incarcerated people (1,839), you would possibly save \$63,454,916 per year. They should be released on parole, not just let go.

One more thing: Do the citizens know that

there is no rehab in prison for sex offenders? Do you know that they only get rehab after they get out? Pretty scary, you think?

Barbara Dickerson
Milton-Freewater

Carry a gun, protect yourself from terrorism

Have we been paying attention? I’m referring to the warning by Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly. He said if we knew what he knew about the ISIS threat in the United States, we would not leave home. OK, I believe him.

Now I know that many in my family have concealed carry permits, but it’s time for the rest of us to pay attention and make sure our protection is available when we leave the house, but also when we are at home.

Look, it’s hard for us to take the threat seriously but we have too much to lose by ignoring the warnings. If you don’t have a concealed weapons carry permit, you need to take the necessary classes, use the necessary safeguards and get comfortable with carrying and using a weapon. I’m serious!

Frank Vincent
Hermiston

LETTERS POLICY

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