

## Immigration Reform

Knowing this column will be published on Christmas Eve, I have contemplated what topic would be appropriate. Finding nothing that seemed fitting for a festive Christmas Eve day, I have chosen to recklessly succumb to the temptation of offering a few potentially naïve observations regarding immigration.

It seems no one is satisfied with the current situation where millions of Mexican nationals are crossing the boarder, often ignoring US immigration laws, and obtaining employment in the US. Our economy continues to absorb their numbers as they find employment in construction, manufacturing, hospitality and agricultural jobs. This influx continues despite the substantial cost and obstacles immigrants face in arriving in this country. Obviously, there is economic incentive to immigrate to this nation, legally or illegally.

Mexico has long had more people of working age than jobs. It is my understanding that unemployment is near 20 percent. The economic pressures of low wages and high unemployment, together with its geographic proximity to the US make immigration almost inevitable. If Mexico enjoyed better economic conditions the volume of immigrants would diminish. I suppose if I were born in Mexico and lacked employment opportunities to provide for my family, I too would be inclined to cross the border.

“That’s fine, but come in legally.” is the customary response. Perhaps we have complicated the immigration process so badly that it is nearly impossible to become “legal”. Most people get frustrated and discouraged even going through the relatively simple process of obtaining a local building permit. Magnify that many times to organize the legal documents required for becoming a legal citizen of the United States. Perhaps we should simplify the process.

I well remember an April 2001 meeting at Bridgerland Applied Technology Center with over 60 agricultural employers and employees. The purpose of our meeting was to assist Spanish workers with application for US citizenship. The Legal Immigration Family Equity Act reportedly provided an opportunity to become totally legal. We had presentations from the Utah Office of Hispanic Affairs, US Department of Immigration Services, Utah Hispanic Advisory Council and legal counsel from a local law firm. Following the presentations, we spend the rest of the day filling out volumes of paperwork. Experts told us the process could take years and the expense would likely be more than Spanish workers could contend with. I don’t know if any of those applicants ever became citizens. The whole process was almost overwhelming.

Another popular suggestion is to “secure the border”. A volunteer citizen group of “Minutemen” drew national attention by patrolling the Arizona border in April 2005. The flood of immigrants continued. Some Congressional leaders have proposed building a 700 mile wall. To paraphrase a recent letter to the editor, our ingenuity in securing the border will only be surpassed by the ingenuity of others in finding a way to cross the border.

A fashionable proposal that I find troubling is the proposition to hold employers liable if they hire undocumented workers. How would an employer know? Certainly, there is no way for a small Cache Valley dairyman to know if the documents provided are legal or fake. Swift and Company, for example, claim to have obeyed all the rules. They required workers' identity papers and have on file the I-9 Forms attesting to that. They also participated in the federal Basic Pilot program, a system of checking Social Security numbers that has been touted as the way to crack down on immigration fraud. If the company pried more aggressively into workers' legal status they would likely face civil rights lawsuits.

Department of Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff said the Swift plant raids were not based on workers' possible illegal citizenship status, but on the fact that some were accused of identity theft. He explained that a loop hole within the Social Security Administration is partly responsible for the propagation of identity theft as a means of illegal immigrants' entry into the US. The current law does not allow the Social Security Administration to report instances where the same Social Security number is used again and again in multiple work places as a basis for obtaining jobs. Only Congress can close that loop hole. Employers cannot be the enforcer as some have suggested.

It is a reality that the US economy achieves a major benefit from these dependable, hard-working individuals who often perform jobs that US citizens are unwilling to work at. The issue is much bigger than simple one-line solutions. Perhaps unpopular options such as granting amnesty or opening the borders to allow free access of goods and people are not unreasonable alternatives after all.