

U.S. reaps benefits of immigration morass it caused

“If we didn't import [more] workers, we would be importing more strawberries.”

In that one statement is contained the ironies, misconceptions, chest-pounding and hypocrisy embroiling immigration in American politics and society today.

The fact is that many businesses would not exist in the United States without immigrant labor and illegal immigration could be stopped if business really wanted it stopped.

U.S. agricultural policy itself is the major cause of our country's massive legal and illegal immigration from Mexico, and what is usually referred to as our immigration “problem,” is actually a boon to our society.

Business wants immigrant labor because few native-born Americans, no matter how desperate, will take stoop-level, piecework agriculture jobs without minimum wage guarantees. Even vegetable harvesting in Eastern Oregon, poultry processing in Nebraska and carpet making in Georgia are a hard sell.

The most vehement opposition to immigration, represented these days by Arizona, is evidently racist and unconstitutional in practice but it exists -- Arizona is partly right -- because no one is backing existing law.

Laws have long existed to bar undocumented workers from jobs. Often known by the acronym for its verification section, SSNVS, the system requires validation and verification of social security numbers and the personal information associated with them.

But the law is complex and prone to color-profiling. Sorting out undocumented from documented workers is costly and employers need the undocumented ones. Strict enforcement of penalties would make it all more expensive. Neither businesses nor politicians want to pay for it.

Overriding all this is the fact that the immigration morass itself exists primarily because the United States so heavily subsidizes agricultural exports that corn, wheat, cotton, beef and four other major farm exports sell in Mexico not only below the cost of U.S. production but below the cost of Mexican production.

We call it “free trade” because there are no tariffs. The world calls it “dumping.”

Between 1997 and 2005, 3 million Mexican producers of corn, one of the country's historic staples, lost \$6.6 billion; wheat producers lost over \$2 billion. With a total loss of almost \$13 billion for its top eight imported commodities, Mexico was forced to spend scarce resources subsidizing its farmers who would not have needed subsidies if the U.S. did not subsidize its own.

Although other forces of modernization have contributed to Mexico's agricultural cataclysm, millions of Mexicans have left their farms, sometimes first for Mexico's already-crowded cities, often directly to the United States.

Beginning in the 1980s, immigrants from Mexico, documented and undocumented, rose to half of all US immigrants, and the foreign-born as a percentage of the total population reached late 19th and early 20th century levels of 12 to 15 percent. Hispanics now account for 11 per cent of Oregon's population.

Yet, if people can put aside their nostalgia for a whiter society, the benefits of this new wave of immigration may be seen to match the past.

There is no evidence that immigrants depress wage levels; free trade, de-unionization and corporate power more than account for stagnant middle and working class incomes. Without immigrant labor, food would cost more, and more businesses, like strawberries and carpets which hire native managers and pay dividends, would go elsewhere.

Thanks to immigration, documented and undocumented, the U.S. is experiencing the smallest decline in the ratio of working-age people in any industrialized country. Immigrants pay the Social Security taxes we need so badly to support the baby-boomer generation. Undocumented workers with fake Social Security numbers actually pay money into a system from which they cannot collect!

Here in Eastern Oregon, if you have not noticed all the Hispanic names not only on our soccer teams but in other sports and across our academic honor rolls, you have not been paying attention.

Now, Mexican birth rates are receding and the exodus from Mexican farms is petering out. A decline in Mexican immigration has already begun. While Oregon, like many states, is arguing over whether to offer in-state university tuition to young people born abroad, we should be recruiting them.

If 400 years of immigrant labor and productivity, food, music, language and science, are not enough contribution to convince us of immigrants' value, maybe losing them will.