

No tidy answer to labor pinch

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Immigrant workers from Mexico sort potatoes at the Spud Seller Inc. in Monte Vista last week. Growers say they face their worst labor shortage in years. But an idea to match those jobs to refugees from Myanmar now located in Denver has many detractors. (Hyoung Chang, The Denver Post)



Help Wanted: San Luis Valley crop growers and shippers desperately seek workers and are willing to recruit Myanmar refugees in Denver eager for jobs and a return to agrarian roots.

It sounds as if it could be a neat solution to two problems. Instead, it has created a backlash.

The mayor of a town in the valley has misgivings. The director of the health care system there has them, too. And the head of the immigrant resource center in Alamosa doesn't think it is a good idea.

"We don't want to go where there is a problem, where they don't want us," said Rocky Martin, leader of a Denver community of about 325 Karen, an ethnic minority displaced by Myanmar's military junta.

The story of the Karen and the San Luis Valley underscores the gap between an immigration policy that discourages the use of migrant workers and an agricultural economy that makes it nearly impossible to use anyone else.

In the valley, the result is labor shortages of up to 50 percent for some growers and shippers.

Mike Abeyta, manager of the Worley & McCullough Inc. potato warehouse, has about 42 workers. He'd like 55 to 60.

"This is the worst I've seen it in five years," he said of the labor crunch.

"The Karen love to work, from what I understand," Abeyta said. "And we need the help."

A raid by immigration officials on undocumented workers last April winnowed the valley's already thin ranks of farm workers. Some spinach and lettuce growers are cutting plantings in half. Others are switching to wheat or alfalfa and other more automated crops.

"We have a chronic labor shortage. It never goes away," said Jim Ehrlich, director of the Colorado Potato Administrative Committee in Monte Vista.

In the valley, agribusiness accounted for 30 percent or more of the jobs in Conejos, Costilla, Rio Grande and Saguache counties in 2005, compared with 4 percent of jobs statewide, according to the Colorado Department of Agriculture.

State legislation in 2007

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beefed up documentation requirements for legal workers.

The new law discourages many established migratory workers, even legal ones, from getting entangled in Colorado's paper labyrinth, labor and agriculture officials say.

"The new law was a good thing in that it tightened everything up — our industry does not want to hire illegal workers — but it didn't find a solution to our labor problems," Ehrlich said. The Karen were seen as one of those solutions.

Martin went to the valley last fall to scope out work opportunities for the Karen but left deflated of hope.

The Karen, although legal, don't speak much English. Nor are they conversant in the valley's second language, Spanish, as Mexican and Guatemalan workers are, officials said.

"We only want to go where people are willing to work with us," Martin said.

Gideon Kaw, a 29-year-old Karen refugee who resettled in Denver three years ago, said the refugees are adaptable and grateful to be anywhere in the United States — "after running all our lives from killing."

Many Karen, an ethnic minority accounting for about 7 percent of Myanmar's population, have been stuck in refugee camps for up to two decades.

Myanmar, known as Burma until 1989, is ruled by a military regime that stands accused of human-rights abuses including the violent displacement of more than 500,000 people.

Denver, while a haven, has presented an economic struggle for resettled Karen.

Without English

skills, many receive low wages and often less than full-time hours in service and manufacturing jobs.

"Wherever you get a job, you follow the job," Kaw said. "You have to feed your family."

Nevertheless, he and other Karen have come to feel that moving to the San Luis Valley would be a mistake.

The relocation proposal found support among Colorado rural housing officials with vacant farm-worker housing. Labor officials found it worthy of consideration. But otherwise, there was resistance.

"We'd rather keep the people who have been working here forever,

Finding cheap labor

San Luis Valley crop growers and shippers suffer chronic labor shortages and have tried to recruit from Denver's Karen refugees from Myanmar. According to the most recent survey, in 2005, agriculture is a half-billion-dollar industry and accounts for nearly 30 percent or more of jobs in most counties of the San Luis Valley. Statewide, agribusiness is a \$45.7 billion industry and accounts for only 4 percent of jobs.



Source: ESOS

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rather than introduce a new population we know nothing about," said Margaret Salazar, director of Valley-Wide Health Systems in Alamosa.

The traditional labor supply to which Valley-Wide is accustomed, however, has dried up.

In the San Luis Valley in 2007, the number of migratory field workers that employers reported fell 200 from the previous year's 400 to 450, said Betty Velasquez, southern regional director of the Colorado Workforce Center.

Still, Center's mayor, Adeline Sanchez, said she is reluctant to bring the Karen to the San Luis Valley. Sanchez said matching up willing workers to pleading employers is simply not enough of an answer.

"We just need to be sure any people we're bringing in are not getting false hopes," Sanchez said. "I'm not for using people for our purposes. We want something for their futures, too."

Part of the resistance to a Karen relocation is the suspicion that it's a short-term solution to labor shortages, but one that doesn't address the underlying problems of low wages.

"If the Karen are seen as the quick fix, (lawmakers) could say there is no need for immigration reform or living wages," said Flora Archuleta, the executive director of the Alamosa-based San Luis Valley Immigrant Resources Center.

"I don't want them to come in and be abused," Archuleta said.

The demanding farm labor pays about \$7 to \$12 an hour, with the higher rate generally reserved for skilled machinery operators, Abeyta said.

"The growers are going to have to recognize the fact — and many of them already do — that they have to pay more," Ehrlich said.

Bringing in the Karen — who would face low wages, seasonal work, no health insurance and limited services — "just perpetuates poverty in the valley," said Mitch Garcia, a Valley-Wide Health official.

Paul Stein, coordinator of the Colorado Refugee Services Program, agrees.

"I'm opposed to refugees suddenly being viewed as a replacement for migrant workers," Stein said. "The San Luis Valley would never be part of our plans because of the economy and lack of community resources."

Last year, the state hosted 1,085 refugees, including the 325 from Myanmar, and most stay in the Denver metro area where 70 percent of programs and services are located, Stein said. The relocation of the Karen to the small communities of the San Luis Valley would guarantee their isolation, not integration, he said.

"They've already lost their country. They've lost family. Their sense of loss is profound," Stein said. "We want the opportunity for their children to move out of the fields and into some economic opportunity."

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