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Crackdown on illegal immigration boosts food prices

By Richard Delgado
Special to The Times

A recent article ["State agrees to check for farmworkers' papers," Times, Local News, Oct. 9] highlights an aspect of our economic predicament that many have overlooked, namely the high cost of food.

Anyone who has shopped in a Seattle supermarket recently knows the cost of many items has been soaring. Only a few months ago, foodstuffs such as milk and produce cost 5 or 10 percent less than they do now. The average household's food budget has increased so sharply that many families are "shopping down" — buying less meat, fresh vegetables and fruit, and convenience food than they did last year.

The reasons for the increased cost of food are complex, including worldwide weather patterns and the high cost of fuel.

But many crops are labor intensive and depend on the ability of growers to secure a sufficient supply of workers at critical stages, for example to harvest a field of lettuce or spinach, or an orchard of apples.

Many farmers are plowing their crops into the ground, realizing that without immigrant workers to pick them, harvesting is simply uneconomical. Still others are shifting to crops that are less labor intensive, even if this means cutting down mature orchards and starting over. The lower supply of food inevitably results in higher prices as consumer dollars chase a dwindling or shifting market.

Of course, the world food market is sufficiently integrated that reduced production in one area — say, Yakima — will cause another region (say, Chile) to pick up the slack. But obtaining produce from a distance when it was formerly available close at hand increases the cost of transportation while placing stress on the environment.

Immigration controls that inhibit the free movement of workers to jobs that need them operate as a drag on the free market, increasing costs all along the line. A nation that closes its borders to essential labor will eventually pay the price.

Studies of immigrants, especially those from Mexico and other parts of Latin America, confirm that they are hardworking and even less likely to break the law or throw themselves on the mercy of welfare authorities than citizens whose ancestors settled the original colonies. They help us enjoy relatively affordable food because they are willing to work long hours under the hot sun, making sure that the nation's food reaches your market. Throughout its history, immigrants have built America, fueling its economy and adding richness to its culture.

When we hear voices railing at immigration and immigrants, it is helpful to keep these facts — and our pocketbooks — in mind.

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