

Senate Agricultural Committee to Talk Workforce

Local News

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Washington's farmers have the product, but will they have the hands to move that product to market? OLYMPIA, Wash. - Legislators will look for solutions to a labor shortage and its disastrous effect on Washington's agricultural economy at the Senate Agriculture & Rural Economic Development Committee hearing from 1:30-3:30 p.m. Dec. 1 in Senate Hearing Room Three of the John A. Cherberg Building.

"We're looking for suggestions about how to get through this problem," says Committee Chairman Sen. Brian Hatfield, D-Raymond. "Clearly the best option is a steady workforce, and we need to make the jobs enticing for that workforce to grow." Although Washington's 2010 agricultural production was the second highest on record, a renewed focus on illegal immigration and the push for mandatory employer use of the E-Verify System may be impacting the labor pool farmers rely on for their harvest.

With 72 percent of seasonal laborers described as undocumented, many farmers believe that any required use of the E-Verify system to check immigration status will continue to shrink the labor force for the harvest. Without workers, large amounts of potentially record-setting crop totals may be left in the fields to rot, impacting the produce market and lowering farmer profits and tax revenues. One option may solve two problems at once: use the agriculture labor shortage to take a bite out of Washington's 9.1-percent unemployment rate. "Clearly there are men and women out of work who would welcome the chance to earn money," says Hatfield. "However, the questions of distance, housing and pay scale need to be addressed before that idea gains traction." Gov. Chris Gregoire has offered another solution: Department of Correction's inmates working in the fields under guard. While the department does offer a deep workforce, higher costs and lower job performance have some farmers looking for a different option. A number of stakeholders in the labor shortage are expected to attend the December committee hearing, including representatives of the Washington Farm Bureau, the Washington Growers League, the Washington State Department of Agriculture and a number of farm owners and operators.