

Laboring Legislation

Immigration reform could have a dramatic impact on the horse industry.

By Jill J. Dunkel

FROM WASHINGTON, D.C., TO THE GREAT PLAINS OF TEXAS, MENTION IMMIGRATION reform to someone on the street, and you're likely to strike up quite a debate. With an estimated 12-15 million illegal and undocumented workers in the United States, immigration reform is one of the most contentious issues that Congress has faced. But mention immigration reform in a room full of breeding farm managers or horse trainers who operate large facilities, and you're likely to hear one resounding theme – we need those workers!

Help Wanted

PETE BOWLING OF OASIS RANCH IN HERALD, CALIFORNIA, UNDERSTANDS THE IMPORTANCE OF NON-AMERICAN WORKERS TO THE HORSE INDUSTRY.

"I get on some blogs and talk to people. One of the things that bothers me the most about this is people ranting. There's so many people that think we want to send (immigrants) home," he said. "But if we did that, I think our nation would shut down."

Many sectors of the economy – the horse industry, farming, orchards, construction, the hotel industry and more – comment there is a lack of American workers willing to fill certain positions in their industries.

Jay Hickey, president of the American Horse Council, spends hours visiting with lawmakers, trying to get them to see the horse industry's side of the story.

"If you said that on January first, all illegal and undocumented workers have to leave the country, it would be a severe blow to the horse industry," Hickey said. "We need to have a way to take care of these workers, and continue to bring in workers each year for temporary or seasonal positions."

The American Horse Council is a national organization representing all segments of the horse industry in Washington, D.C. The council is member supported by about 160 organizations and 1,200 individuals from every facet of the horse world – from owners, breeders, trainers, veterinarians, farriers, breed registries and horsemen's associations to horse shows, racetracks, rodeos, commercial suppliers and state horse councils. The group is lobbying on Capitol Hill for immigration legislation that would permit illegal immigrants working in the United States a path to legalized status, and perhaps ultimately a green card.

"The industry is not opposed to some reform. Things like employers must check that the workers are legal with the government, that's fine as long as they don't close the borders and make it where these workers can't come in. You don't get a lot of Americans wanting this type of work. You need alien workers," Hickey explained.

In Bowling's years of managing breeding operations in Texas and now California, he has never had an Anglo-American

apply for a job to clean stalls, feed horses, fix fence and do routine maintenance.

"Not one person in 12 years has applied for a job like that. But we have three to five Mexican-descent workers that come down the driveway every week looking for that kind of work," Bowling said. "American kids want to come here and ride horses. If I mention cleaning stalls and feeding, they say, 'Gee, that's not really what I want to do,' and they're off looking for something else."

Americans are not interested in these jobs, Bowling said.

"They aren't. I wish it wasn't so, but it's a fact. No American wants to do that kind of work. They want the glamour of going to the horse shows. They want to be a trainer. The least they'll settle for is being a looper for a cutter. At least then they get to travel, eat out, enjoy the show."

Bowling said his ranch's employment records are inspected once a year by the state of California. The state verifies his records, and makes sure taxes are being withheld from all workers.

"As long as the taxes are taken out, that's what they look for. They don't verify green cards. The auditor just wants to make sure the state is getting all of their taxes."

Bowling pays his noncitizen workers above minimum wage.

"We pay in social security and withholding tax. These guys even have health insurance. It's not that we're paying these workers less than Americans. That's what some people say, but they are paid above minimum wage, have health insurance, and contribute to Social Security. Yet if they don't become legal citizens, they will never see a cent of it," he said.

"I want them to stay. I need the Mexican-descent workers. They are our day-to-day operation," Bowling said. "They are such hard workers. A lot of the work on farms used to be done by high school kids, out of school for the summer. I did

that, too. But guess what, my ranch doesn't just operate in the summer. I've still got horses and cattle to take care of the nine months they are in school."

Bowling said he needs people who will go out day after day, and do the hard or monotonous jobs.

"I've been in the horse business all of my life, and I would



LARRI JO STARKEY

never tell anyone this business is easy. Driving fancy trucks and going to horse shows, that's just two days a week. The other five, you get dirty and muddy. I need someone that will go out there in knee-deep mud and carry that baby colt in because we missed getting his mother inside in time. A lot of American workers, they aren't going to go out there and do that. I do it, and the Mexican boys that work for us do it. That's what I need."

Bowling admits that illegals might be a cause of problems in big cities. He said he's sure there are problems with gangs in Los Angeles and other major cities. But in the country, he doesn't see that.

"We see a bunch of hardworking people who are willing to work, any day of the week, whether it's a holiday or not. The farmers around here, those with vineyards and crop farmers, they would all be shut down too, if they could not employ these workers," Bowling said.

Amy Gumz of Gumz Farms, North Judson, Indiana, has to compete with local farmers for workers.

"A lot of the crop farmers have been scooping up the migrant workers," she said.

In Gumz's area of the country, the alien workers are part of a very large migrant community.

"It's not quite like Texas. As soon as the snow flies, the workers want to leave. But in general, the demand for legal labor is high. Supply is down. We are finding it's harder and harder to attract good labor. Labor costs increase and demand exceeds supply."

Because of the demands, Gumz is hiring American workers, but many are not from the traditional labor pool.

"It's increased our costs. A lot of migrant workers had equine experience and a good work ethic. American workers willing to take labor jobs just don't have the work ethic. Most American workers don't know anything about horses. They're afraid or they do a substandard job. They're harder to train, and they have a higher turnover rate. It's very frustrating."

Gumz typically employs four to five laborers to clean stalls, water, do grounds maintenance and the like. The rest of her employees are salaried, including some interns who work in the breeding operation.

"We're hiring some retirees and stay-at-home moms. They seem to have more longevity than a traditional young, full-time worker. They're great as long as we don't need them when the kids need them. As long as they don't have to come to work until the kids get on the bus, and they're done when the kids get off the bus, it's fine. Retirees have a great work ethic, but their hours can be limited so they can still collect social security," Gumz said.

In Congress

CONGRESS — AS OF PRESS TIME — IS DEBATING THREE DIFFERENT immigration packages. The AgJOBS Bill is in the House, and is strictly aimed at agricultural workers. It implements a system where workers can legalize their status. If they can

prove they have worked in the United States and agree to work in the future, pay back taxes and substantial fines, it puts them on the road to a green card.

The STRIVE Act has also been introduced. It establishes a program for non-agricultural workers that are also part of the horse industry, such as workers at a horse show venue, or those who work on the backstretch of the race track. Another bill is also in the Senate.

"The industry supports the bills debating right now. They have broad security measures, such as background checks and more, before the hiring provisions would kick in," Hickey explained. "The Department

of Homeland Security must confirm these security measures are in place, then workers can file for the programs. These bills provide ways to get legalized workers in the industry, but the workers couldn't file for citizenship until the eight year

backlog of applicants is cleared."

No doubt about it, it's an emotional issue.

"Opponents say that anything that allows people in the country to legalize their status is deemed amnesty," Hickey said. "To me, this is not amnesty. They must go through

a number of steps, and pay a number of fines, before they can even legalize their status."

Hickey said finding a way to legalize alien workers affects much more than just the horse industry, and it's not a Republican or Democratic issue.

"This is huge. We have to lobby both sides of Congress. It can't pass

in the Senate with just one vote difference in the parties. It needs bipartisan support."

Hickey and other members of the horse council, including representatives of AQHA, are meeting with various congressmen and their staff, pointing out why these measures are important.

"We explain this and a number of other bills, asking for their support," he said.

No Easy Answers

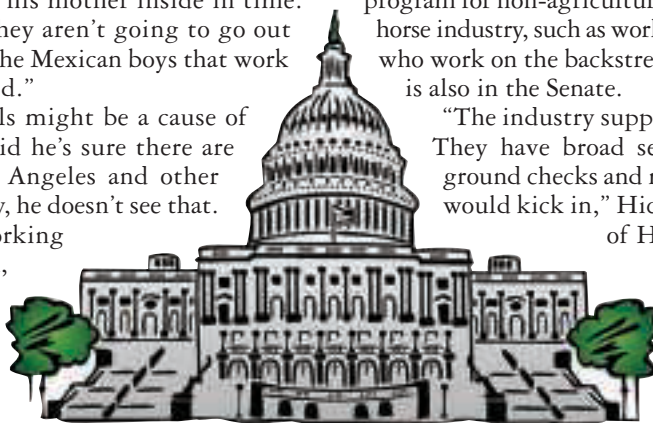
BOWLING ADMITTED HE DOESN'T KNOW WHAT THE ANSWER IS.

"It can be political suicide in the South to say to give these people amnesty. Most people I talk to that are against it, they want to load up these workers on cattle trucks, take them to the border and dump them out. I think the opponents think as soon as these workers are gone, all of these Americans will want these jobs. But they don't.

"I'm sure my political positionings have hurt our business a little bit. I'm a little more outspoken than the regular horse person. But it's funny. Some of the same people who are fussing about immigrants, they come to our place and say we take such great care of their mares. They talk about how our place is well-groomed and spotless," Bowling said.

"Who do they think is doing all of this work?" ■

Jill J. Dunkel is a special contributor to The American Quarter Horse Journal. To comment, write to aqhajrnl@aqha.org.



Legislation

A detailed analysis of pending immigration legislation (as of June 25, 2007) is available on the American Horse Council website, www.horsecouncil.org. Click on "Legislation," and go to the section under 110th Congress.

For updates on any action in Congress regarding immigration, log onto www.aqha.com.