

Illegal Aliens

INS law leaves farms short-handed

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WATSONVILLE — The new immigration law is creating problems for some farmers who are having a hard time finding enough laborers to pick their crops.

While the aim of the law is to restrict the number of workers who enter the United States illegally every year, some farmers are surprised by the drastic shortage of field workers.

The problem is even more acute father north, especially in the state

of Washington, where strawberries are approaching the harvesting season, according to Jess Brown, manager of the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau.

"Our state organization had a call from Washington state. They're really having a time up there," said Brown.

Brown isn't exactly sure what has caused the shortage of field workers. "We've tried to analyze this and the only things we can come up with are that whereas many workers might have left an area to migrate before,

now they might want to stay with their job ... to not create any problems in getting their employment records in order.

"The other thing is that maybe we saw a lot of people coming from Mexico in the past who are now afraid of the employer sanctions against hiring, and they're staying behind," he said.

The new Immigration Reform and Control Act, which went into effect May 5, prohibits employers from hiring undocumented workers. Fines range from \$250 to \$2,000 for first

offense. Workers have to present adequate identification, such as a social security card, or a letter saying they've applied for either permanent or temporary residency in order to be legally hired.

Another provision of the law, for special agricultural workers (SAWs), takes effect June 1. That will allow workers who've been in the United States from May 1985-86 for at least 90 days to obtain temporary status.

Ernil Agaccio, a raspberry farmer
Please see Page A5

INS

Continued from Page A1
on Hecker Pass Road, said his work crew normally numbers 100 to 125 people this time of year, but now it's down to 40.

"Everything we grow is hand-picked," he said. "If we don't get some workers in here by the first of June the crops are going to be ripen and we won't have anyone here to pick them."

Agaccio said the Employment Development Department is the only organization sending him workers, but out of five that show up, only one stays to work. "We used to turn away eight or 10 people a day," he said.

Agaccio pinned the problem on fear. "They seem afraid. Fewer people are wandering from crop to crop, even if they've been here the last four to five years. Some of them are afraid to apply for SAWs. And there are also a lot of people taking advantage of them, offering to provide documentation at high prices," said Agaccio.

Agaccio said his wages of between \$4.50 and \$6 an hour are "not a bad wage, but the locals won't work for that."

David Martinez is one of Agaccio's farm laborers who has applied for naturalization. He's from the state of Michoacan, Mexico, and said many of his friends who used to migrate north during the spring and summer are staying behind this year.

"I think most people are afraid to come," said Martinez. "What they hear is that employers are not hiring people anymore. A lot are not going to come back. They are afraid of the immigration law."

Martinez said half of his family has already gained legal status and the rest are working on it. But many people he encounters in the fields "don't know where to go for help."

Several groups have banded together to form the Santa Cruz County Immigration Project to help workers apply for residency. Their phone number is 724-5667.

Joe Tomasello, who farms row crops like lettuce, said his crew of workers is back this year, but added he's heard of several other farmers who are short-handed this year.

"The wage scale is all over the board, and I bet the higher-paying jobs are filled," he said.

The labor-intensive crops, such as strawberries and bush berries, are experiencing more of the crunch, he said.

Adding to the problem is that the Pajaro Valley has more acreage planted in strawberries this year, requiring more workers, he said.

"The intent of the law was to cut the flow — and I think that's exactly what it's done," Tomasello said.