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C O M M E N T A R Y

When the Politics of Food and Politics of Immigration Collide—Who Wins?

By Barbara Ginley

Like many, my weekly purchasing decisions are influenced by where the food comes from, how it was grown, and in whose pockets my money will end up. To me, keeping Maine's farms financially viable is a way to directly support the wages that are paid to some of the state's hardest workers, migrant farm workers. It is a slight reframing of the familiar mantra of "buy local," but, personally, it is an important distinction.

The U.S. enjoys one of the world's most plentiful, safe, and inexpensive food supplies, in part because of the contributions of migrant farm workers. The majority of Maine's migrant workers are Hispanic (64 percent), with African-Caribbean (22 percent), and American Indian/Native American (10 percent) being the next largest groups (Maine Migrant Health Program's UDS Data, 2010). They are present in all of Maine's harvest areas, planting, harvesting, processing, and packing some of the state's major crops: broccoli, blueberries, apples, potatoes, and Christmas trees/wreaths. Many of the state's growers are dependent on this workforce and the expertise these workers bring as farmers to Maine's orchards, nurseries, fields, and barrens.

What are we willing to do to support Maine's migrant farm workers? To acknowledge all the benefits we gain from this majority immigrant workforce is an important first step. But this step needs to be followed by thoughtful policy discussion and development that takes into consideration the root causes of migration and the true cost and obvious benefits to society of immigrant participation in our labor force. We also need to address myths and inaccuracies about immigrants living and working in our communities. For example, the majority of farm workers served by the Maine Migrant Health Program (MMHP) are living below the poverty level and are NOT receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), food stamps, Medicaid, or Medicare. Yes, their wages support their families who are back "home," but they also spend their money locally on food, gas, hard goods, auto repairs, and rent to local landlords, along with state and federal taxes.

The national immigration "problem" is not just about who passed over a border without certain documents. It is interwoven with U.S. trade, agricultural, and environmental policies. It is all too easy to say immigration is the issue when such things as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) have radically altered the policy landscape and countless lives south of the border. Just as one example, the cost of tortillas, a staple in the Mexican diet, increased more than 500 percent in the first five years of NAFTA's implementation. If we were honest, we might acknowledge that if our children were hungry, we might be tempted to go to another country, even without proper documents, in order to feed them.

The issues presented by immigration need to be addressed in a humane and

rational way, without succumbing to rhetoric or strident calls for harsh policies. So, the next time you join a discussion about immigration reform, take a step back and ask yourself, "What fruits and vegetables did I eat today, where did they come from, and whose hands planted or picked that food? Why are they here? And to whom am I beholden?" 🐸