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U.S. immigration laws sapping trade, businesses say

By KRISTEN MILLARES YOUNG
P-I REPORTER

They came to the Port of Seattle's Pier 69 representing potato farmers, software developers, apple growers and racehorse trainers.

Despite their diverse backgrounds, the message repeated by all at Monday's trade and immigration round table converged at a single point: U.S. immigration policy has been broken for too long, and it is sapping trade, the lifeblood of Washington state.

"When I walk into a grocery store and to the produce station, I see hands," said Josh Koempel, the manager of Potentiality Orchards in Cashmere. "Whether pears, apples, cherries, peaches or apricots, they have all been touched by hands, multiple times."

In Washington state, and indeed across the U.S., the majority of those hands are brown. They belong primarily to the nation's exploding Latino population, projected to rise from 42 million in 2005 to 128 million in 2050.

Without them, the fruit and vegetables needed for a healthful diet will rot in the fields, said Dave Carlson, the chief executive of the Washington Apple Commission. The Mexican population is the fastest-growing in Washington state, and, like many others, Mexican immigrants are watching the tortured national debate with bated breath.

"I see a lot of fear in the community on our side of the state," Koempel said, describing how rumors of immigration roadblocks catch like wildfire whether true or not.

After the collapse of immigration reform in Congress last summer, many groups from both sides are still stirring up the debate. Starting Friday and continuing through April 30, the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps of Washington state -- an anti-immigrant group that sets up unofficial border patrols to try to catch illegal crossers -- are monitoring the U.S.-Canadian border in the hopes of catching people in the act and then calling U.S. Customs and Border Protection to nab them.

Although many Americans seem content to benefit from the trade economy's ripple effect of lower-cost goods, the nation has become embroiled in rhetoric and finger pointing about the labor structure that supports it.

"Labor is needed to make our economy move," said Matthew Harris, the Washington State Potato Commission's director of trade, who cited the potato industry's \$3.2 billion direct and indirect economic effect on the state.

It is not just the fields, factories and service sector that call to the foreign-born, though much of the national debate has focused on such low-wage jobs.

Microsoft Corp. Associate General Counsel Lydia Tamez described how the nation's extreme shortage of green cards and "arbitrary visa quotas" -- and long waiting times for those the U.S. does furnish -- is hurting the software giant, which "though a U.S. company, is at its core a global organization."

Calling the current restrictions "a major business challenge for Microsoft," Tamez described how fierce competition for the best and brightest minds is clashing with the drawn-out uncertainty of being granted access to the U.S. to force Microsoft jobs outside of the country.

"Workers that need these visas simply can't be recruited, and the green-card shortages also hamper our ability to hire people because they don't want to wait eight to nine years to get a green card," Tamez said.

Microsoft is expanding its development centers outside the U.S., growing in China, India, Ireland, Britain and, most recently, Canada.

"When U.S. policy toward immigration does not allow businesses to implement the plans that they would prefer and hire highly skilled workers in the U.S., those businesses are often forced to move work to where the needed skilled workers are available," Tamez said.

Washington state, ranked 11th in the nation for a foreign-born work force, lost out to Vancouver, B.C., where Microsoft located a software development center.

"Our immigration policy is broken in part because we have not gone back and reformed our immigration system to meet the demands of our economy," said Pramila Jayapal, founder and executive director of the anti-discrimination group Hate Free Zone Washington. She later said, "We have free flow of goods but not free flow of people, and while I'm not an advocate for open borders, there is a disconnect between our economic and immigration policies."

Jon Wyss is director of government affairs for Gebbers Farms, the nation's third-largest apple and cherry farm. He cited the state's \$4.95 billion in exports between July 2006 and June 2007 as reason enough to get serious on a state level about dealing with immigration reform.

Ninety-six percent of global food customers live outside the U.S., Wyss said, making Washington ports "the refrigerators of the world" supporting the state's top employer: agriculture.

The influx of immigrants and foreign investment can spell cash for Washington state, said Mark Calhoon of the state's Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development.

Washington's 11,663 foreign students contributed \$268 million to the state's economy last year, according to the New York-based Institute of International Education that Calhoon cited.

On the investment side, the Commerce Department in 2005 found that foreign-owned companies employ nearly 86,000 workers in Washington. A quarter of those jobs are in manufacturing, representing about 8 percent of the state's total manufacturing employment.

Members of the round table suggested that the Port of Seattle Commission attest its commitment as a governing body to immigration reform and that the five-member board of elected port overseers bring together the business community to rally around immigration reform.

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