

CUTT

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Immigration Issues: Perceptions of Golf Course Superintendents

According to federal statistics, 11,870 golf courses and country clubs reported one or more employees in 2006. This industry generated a payroll of \$7.8 billion (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). The census definition of golf courses and country clubs includes 1) establishments primarily engaged in operating golf courses (except miniature) and 2) establishments primarily engaged in operating golf courses along with dining facilities and other recreational facilities that are known as country clubs. The top 10 golfing states (California, New York, Ohio, Florida, Michigan, Texas, Pennsylvania, Illinois, North Carolina, and Wisconsin), measured in terms of golf course/country club numbers, account for about half of all golf business establishments in the country (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

However, when looking at employment, the focal point of this study, aggregate federal data have two limitations. First, due to the seasonal nature of the industry, the size of the work force is understated because federal statistics report employee numbers during the week of March 12 each year and not during the peak of the season. A second concern relates to the types of golf

course positions included in the census data. While the survey discussed in this report focuses only on golf course maintenance employees, the Census Bureau data on golf courses include additional workers in the golf facility including the pro shop, restaurant, etc.

With these limitations in mind, the Census Bureau reports just over 309,000 employees for the U.S. in 2006. The aggregate federal data demonstrate a slow but steady upturn in employment in this industry over the past decade, with employment numbers increasing by more than 39,000 or 14% over the 1998-2006 span. During that same time frame, the number of Hispanic workers hired into golf course maintenance positions is thought to have increased dramatically. Golf course superintendents across the United States have increasingly relied on Hispanic workers to staff golf course maintenance positions and increasingly report that local workers often are not interested in golf course maintenance work or do not have a strong work ethic. Anecdotal reports from golf course superintendents indicate that Hispanic workers make important contributions. They are willing to work

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In recent years as the debate over immigration reform in the U.S. has escalated, the presence of Hispanic workers, especially those who may not be legally authorized to work in the U.S., has come under scrutiny by elected officials, the public and the media.

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long hours, are very respectful, usually come from backgrounds in agriculture or horticulture and possess a very strong work ethic.

In recent years as the debate over immigration reform in the U.S. has escalated, the presence of Hispanic workers, especially those who may not be legally authorized to work in the U.S., has come under scrutiny by elected officials, the public and the media. This study is an initial attempt to gather information on the role of Hispanic immigrants in golf course maintenance positions and superintendents' attitudes regarding labor supply and immigration issues. To date, very little information has been collected regarding the impact that immigration issues, especially those relating to Hispanic workers, have on the golf course superintendent's profession.

Survey Objectives

The survey has three overall objectives. The first is to determine how concerned survey participants are regarding labor availability in the next 3 years. The second objective is to ascertain the importance survey participants place on immigration reform and their views regarding the

golf course superintendents perceive as their educational needs relating to immigration issues.

Methodology

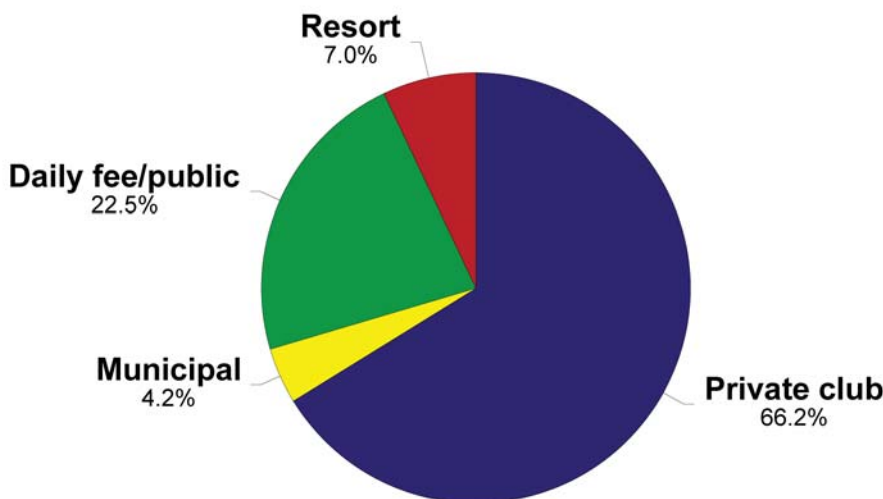
The individuals who completed the survey were attendees at seminars presented by the lead author entitled "Managing the Hispanic Workforce." Two groups of individuals agreed to complete the survey form. The first group was 23 individuals who attended a conference in Stone Mountain Georgia in October, 2007. The second group of survey participants were 48 individuals who attended a seminar at the Golf Industry Show in Orlando, Florida in February, 2008. To avoid double counting, participants were asked to designate only one individual from each golf course to fill out the survey.

Only those superintendents who currently hire Hispanic workers were asked to participate. There are two reasons why this approach was taken. First, there is increasing anecdotal evidence that immigration issues are being widely discussed by golf course superintendents but there is little substantive information regarding the impact that Hispanic workers have on the industry. Second, superintendents who currently hire Hispanic workers have unique insights into the contributions the workers make to the industry, the immigration concerns the workers face and the impact immigration policy has on the availability of legal immigrant workers. This report attempts to describe these insights in detail.

Immigration Policy Solutions

Survey participants were asked the following question regarding how to solve current immigration problems. In your position as a golf course superintendent, what, in your opinion, would be the best solution to immigration issues facing the golf course management industry? Out of the 71 survey participants, 61 or 86% provided a written response to this

What type of golf course do you work for?



development of future immigration policies. The third objective is to help identify what

question, and the proposed solutions varied. Implicit in the participant responses was the recognition that recruiting legally authorized Hispanic workers is often a challenge. Superintendents are very aware of the immigration debate in the United States and generally feel that access to an authorized workforce is of paramount concern to their profession.

The responses, while varied, revealed several important themes. The most frequent set of responses (12) related to the perceived need for a process that would allow immigrants to achieve legal status to work in the U.S. but would not necessarily include citizenship. The second most frequent set of responses (10) encouraged the continuation and improvement of the H-2B program. Examples of suggested improvements included making the program easier to use and they especially wanted to see an increase in the number of H-2B workers allowed in the country annually.

A third set of responses (9) related to the desire to have a practical guest worker program that allows an authorized gateway for immigrants who want to work in the U.S. on a seasonal basis. It is important to note that the H-2B program is in fact an established seasonal guest worker program already available to golf course superintendents. The suggestion of a more generic guest worker program, therefore, may imply a desire for a different or more streamlined program than the current H-2B program.

A fourth theme was immigration enforcement. Eight respondents made comments referring to enforcement either at the border or in the workplace. For example, one respondent called for "harsher penalties for employing illegals." Another said "no free rides" and a third said "enforce the laws already on the books."

A few respondents mentioned the issue of citizenship for unauthorized workers but not all were in agreement. Some wanted to see amnesty or similar opportunities for workers to become citizens, while others were strongly opposed to providing an easy path to citizenship for unauthorized

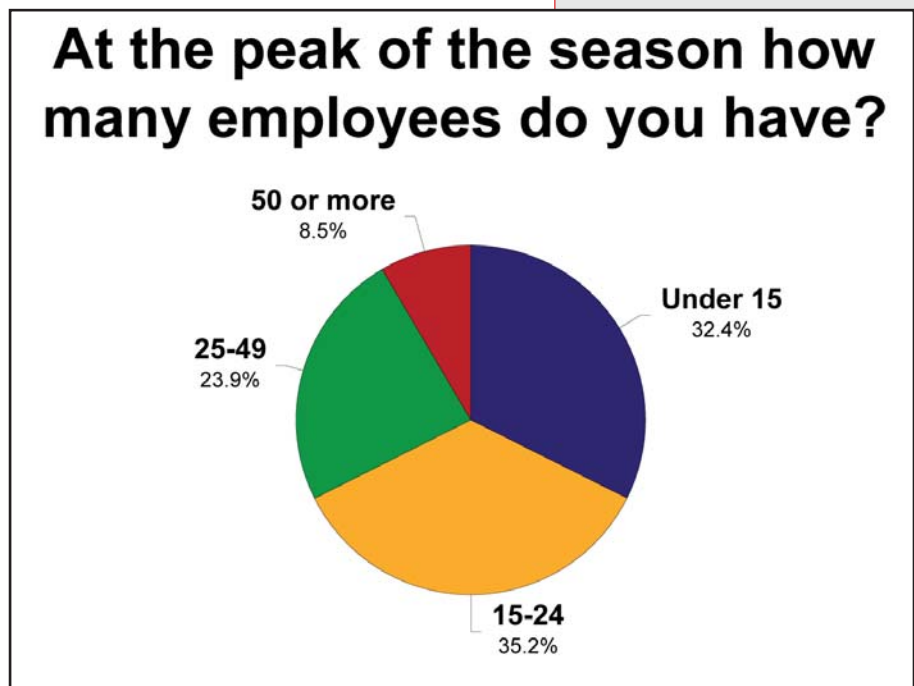
workers.

Perhaps the best way to summarize respondents' feelings regarding an immigration solution is to say that they recognize the problems created by the presence of unauthorized workers and favor options for an immigration status that allows legal employment in the U.S. This does not necessarily mean provisions for an immediate path to citizenship. Rather, several superintendents expressed a desire to help their workers engage in a process that would allow them to work in the U.S. legally, either with a temporary work visa or an eventual path to citizenship.

Survey Implications and Discussion

In 2006, the PEW Hispanic Center reported that there were 6 million unauthorized immigrants working in the United States in 2005. Further, the report indicated that 25% of the workers in the grounds maintenance occupation were unauthorized. This is the sector that

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includes golf course workers. Considering these estimates, it stands to reason that the golf course superintendents surveyed are concerned about the legal status of workers who apply for golf course positions and the potential risks related



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to hiring unauthorized workers. These concerns are strongly reflected in the survey responses. One notable example is that 10% of those surveyed said that they had a worker deported because he/she was unauthorized.

Perhaps one of the most striking survey results was the percent of Hispanic workers

respondents reported that less than half of their workforce was Hispanic, suggesting that superintendents who hire Hispanic workers tend to hire mostly Hispanic workers.

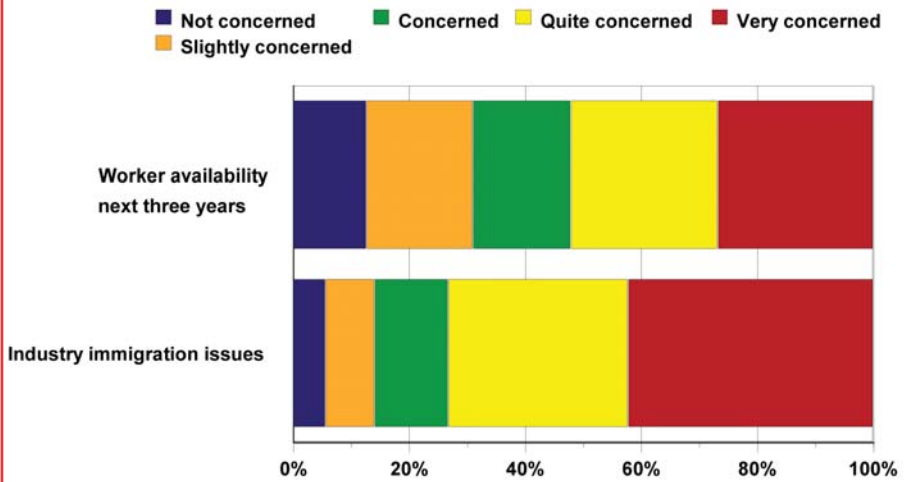
The most common sentiment expressed by survey participants regarding immigration was the desire to hire immigrants who are legally authorized to work in the U.S. Likewise, participants indicated that immigration policy solutions should include ways for immigrants to become authorized to work in the U.S. before they arrive in the country. By their answers, it is clear that respondents recognize that many prospective employees in the immigrant labor pool are not legally authorized to work in the United States. They understand the regulatory implications and in a broad sense prefer options that provide them access to immigrant workers who are authorized to work and live in the U.S.

Survey respondents' concerns are illustrated in the graph to the left regarding worker availability and immigration issues. More than 60% said they were concerned, quite concerned or very concerned about worker availability over the next three years. Concern expressed over immigration issues was even greater.

Survey respondents' strong concern regarding immigration reform is illustrated in the graph to the left. Almost all respondents said that a national comprehensive reform was either important, quite important or very important. Also, respondents place a high level of importance on providing undocumented workers a path to legal status or citizenship.

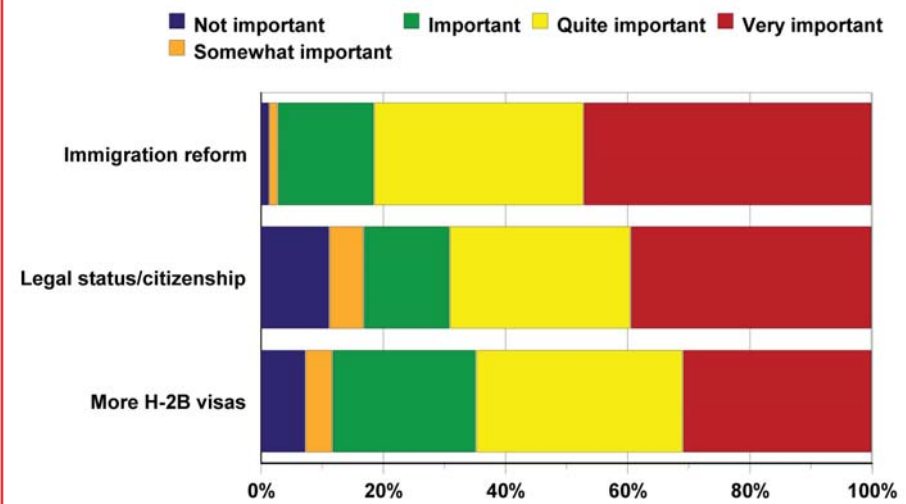
A commonly referenced topic emerging from the survey was the H-2B program, which allows service workers into the U.S. on a temporary, seasonal basis. Of the 71 golf course superintendents surveyed, only 13% said that they were currently using the H-2B program. Others expressed interest in learning more about the program, recognizing that H-2B is currently one of the most effective ways to hire legally authorized immigrant workers on a seasonal basis. While survey participants generally consider the H-2B program to be valuable,

**How concerned are you about:
- worker availability over the next three years
- immigration issues relating to the industry**



employed on the survey respondents' golf courses. One criteria of the survey was that each participant employs at least one Hispanic worker. On average,

How important do you feel each of the following issues are to the golf course management industry?



survey participants reported that 72% of their workforce at the peak of the season were Hispanic. Only 25% of the survey



they also acknowledge its limitations. First, the administration and bureaucratic process for H-2B is considered an important program limitation. Superintendents would prefer a program more streamlined and easy to use. Second, there are limits on how many new H-2B workers can enter the country annually. For 2008, the number of new workers is capped at 66,000, so low that not all superintendents and other eligible employers who want H-2B workers at the present time can hire them. This greatly limits the opportunity to hire legally authorized Hispanic immigrants. Concern over the H-2B cap is evident from Figure 9. More than 80% of the survey respondents indicated that increasing the number of H-2B workers was either important, quite important or very important.

The H-2B program appears to be a double edged sword for golf course superintendents. On one hand, it is an effective way to attract a legally authorized immigrant workforce. On the other hand, it is considered expensive, cumbersome and limited by the cap in workers allowed into the program. The answers to the open ended questions sometimes made reference to a generic guest worker program or a program that will provide work visas. This suggests that some survey respondents may be looking for an easier more efficient

alternative to the H-2B program.

Overwhelmingly, participants in the survey wanted to see changes in immigration policy. When asked how important they feel immigration reform was to the golf course management industry, more than 90% answered that the issue was either important, quite important or very important. More than 75% said that a path to citizenship or legal status was important.

Conclusion

The golf course superintendents surveyed all employ Hispanic workers. This was intentional in order to gather information from those most likely to be directly impacted by future immigration policy discussions. Survey participants recognized the difficulties with unauthorized workers and clearly would like to see legislative solutions to the challenges created by their presence in the labor pool. The challenge ahead for the industry will be to determine how to most effectively influence the political process to achieve immigration reform and to advocate for improvements in the H-2B program.

Thomas R. Maloney and
Nelson L. Bills

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A 2009 Fundraiser Tournaments Thank You

NYSTA would like to recognize the following associations, clubs and superintendents for hosting these 2009 fundraiser tournaments to benefit the turfgrass industry.

Thank you for your support!

Finger Lakes AGCS Scholarship/Research Golf Tournament, Peter George, Ravenwood Golf Club

Central New York GCSA Poa Annual Golf Tournament, Jody Merchant, Pompey Club

Adirondack GCSA Poa Annual Golf Tournament, Cal Lewis and Joe DeForest, Lake Placid Resort Golf Club

Northeastern GCSA Poa Annual Golf Tournament, Richard Smathers, Mohawk Golf Club

Metropolitan GCSA Poa Annual Golf Tournament, John Carlone, CGCS, Meadow Brook Club

Sullivan County Challenge/Steve Smith Memorial Tournament, Mike McNamara, Grossinger Golf and Country Club