



# How Georgia's Anti-Immigration Law Could Hurt the State's (and the Nation's) Economy

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Tom Baxter October 2011



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# Introduction and summary

In April, Georgia enacted H.B.87, an anti-immigration law that mirrors Arizona's ill-fated 2010 law, S.B.1070. Like S.B. 1070, Georgia's Illegal Immigration Reform and Enforcement Act makes it a crime to knowingly harbor or transport undocumented immigrants, imposes harsh penalties for providing false papers to an undocumented immigrant, and empowers law enforcement to check the immigration status of anyone they reasonably suspect to be in the country illegally. In addition, Georgia's law dramatically expands the requirement for employers to use the federal E-Verify system, which checks the work eligibility requirement of employees.<sup>2</sup>

These laws do not operate in a vacuum, and states and localities that recently passed anti-immigrant bills have experienced significant negative economic consequences. In Arizona, for example, the losses from S.B. 1070 totaled \$141 million in conference cancellations alone and \$253 million in overall economic output with the potential for far more in the future.<sup>3</sup> Cities that passed anti-immigrant ordinances also saw steep costs—Farmers Branch, Texas, spent \$4 million in legal fees defending its laws, and Hazelton, Pennsylvania, will spend upwards of \$5 million to defend its law.<sup>4</sup>

Georgia's legislators acknowledge that the state's bill will affect its agricultural industry, which is heavily reliant on migrant workers to pick crops and gin cotton. Written into the preamble to Section 20.1 of H.B. 87 is a recognition of the importance of an industry that brings in 12 percent (roughly \$67 billion) of the state's gross domestic product:<sup>5</sup>

Whereas, Georgia's agricultural industry is a vital pillar for this state's economy and essential to the quality of life enjoyed by all Georgians. And whereas, understanding the impact of immigration reform measures on Georgia's important agricultural industry is a fundamental key to the implementation of immigration reform.<sup>6</sup>

Business groups attempted to stop the bill from being passed. Two hundred agricultural leaders sent a letter to the legislature expressing their opposition to the bill. But the legislature pressed on—even with the experience of Arizona behind them and even with an acknowledgment of the potentially devastating effects of the law on the agricultural sector.

What will the effects of Georgia’s anti-immigrant law be on the state?

It is true that putting an exact figure on economic losses is difficult with the remarkable diversity of agricultural products, seasonal cycles, and size and sophistication of farming in Georgia. But we already have a sense of just how devastating H.B. 87 will be to Georgia’s economy with evidence trickling in that migrant workers are bypassing the state because of its immigration law.<sup>7</sup>

This report seeks to combine existing information on agricultural losses from H.B. 87 with in-depth reporting and interviews with growers on the ground who are experiencing the ramifications of passage for themselves. It also examines the long-term consequences for the state—and for America’s food security as a whole—if migrant workers continue to avoid Georgia.

The report makes four main arguments:

First, Georgia is already beginning to see a severe labor shortage from workers avoiding the state due to its immigration law. This shortage is likely to reverse a decades-long trend in which fruit and vegetable crops gained an increasing share of the state’s total farm value and enlarged Georgia’s agricultural sector. Early reports from the state already estimate economic losses for the 2011 growing season to be between \$300 million and \$1 billion.<sup>8</sup>

We further estimate Georgia would see close to \$800 million in lost farm gate value per year—the price of a crop when sold by a farm—if it replaced all of its handpicked crops with mechanically harvested crops as a way to avoid the problem of securing adequate migrant labor. Farm gate value is only a metric of the amount of money at the time of sale from the farm itself, not the ultimate price that consumers might pay. So these figures are conservative at best in terms of total economic loss to the state. (see Table 1)

Second, the effects of a lack of migrant labor will be felt most acutely by small farmers, who are already at a comparative disadvantage with larger growers. We estimate that

## TABLE 1 H.B. 87’s devastating effects on Georgia’s agricultural economy

### 2011 losses

- **\$300 million** estimated loss in harvested crop statewide
- **\$1 billion** estimated in total economic impact on Georgia’s economy
- **Untold millions** in losses to the economies of small towns and farmers dependent on immigrant labor

### Future losses

- **\$797 million** loss per year in crop value across the state if Georgia replaced all of its handpicked crops with mechanized crops that do not require migrant labor
- **\$1.2 million** loss per year in crop value for the average small farmer if he or she replaced all of their handpicked crops with mechanized crops that do not require migrant labor
- **Untold millions** in losses to the economies of small towns and farmers dependent on immigrant labor

Sources: Interviews with Bryan Tolar, July–August 2011; calculations done by the Center for American Progress using data from: Susan R. Boatright and John C. McKissick, “2009 Georgia Farm Gate Value Report” (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development, 2010).

the average small farm will lose \$1.2 million per year in farm gate value by switching to machine-grown crops—a loss that will sink most small farms.

Third, Georgia’s economy is a complex and intertwined machine. Losses in the agricultural sector have a multiplier effect that resounds throughout the economy. A loss of close to \$800 million per year in crop value to Georgia’s economy will significantly increase unemployment and hurt the state as a whole.

By some estimates, each job in the agricultural sector supports three other “upstream” jobs, including in professions such as processing and transportation. H.B. 87 may ultimately mean not simply the loss of migrant jobs but jobs for American citizens in industries that rely on agriculture as well.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, many small communities in Georgia rely on the money and consumption power of migrant workers to stay afloat, and they are in danger of seeing significant losses to their already strapped economies.

Finally, just as changes in the agriculture sector affect Georgia as a whole, changes in Georgia’s ability to produce food affects the country as a whole. Losing hand-picked crops in Georgia such as berries, peaches, and onions would force us to import these crops from other countries. This change leaves our food security, health, and safety standards in the hands of others. Similarly, food prices will increase with longer travel times.

“We are in a darkened room, walking around with our arms out,” worried Ben Evans, a South Georgia cotton gin operator, about the future. Evans must wait until the seven-day-a-week, 12-hour shifts begin before he can determine how much his business, which runs on all-Hispanic crews, will be affected by the labor shortages.<sup>10</sup>

Evans’s frank assessment also could describe where Georgia is in coming to terms with the challenges its number-one industry faces in the wake of last year’s legislative action.

H.B. 87’s full effects may not be observable in Georgia for many months or even a few years. But we hope that the preliminary findings laid out in this report provide a cautionary tale for legislators in other states considering their own version of anti-immigrant legislation.

A federal solution to the issue of undocumented labor in the agricultural industry, the AgJOBS bill, has been on the table for more than 10 years. But legislative

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opposition from the same breed of immigration restrictionists that promoted these state-based anti-immigrant measures has blocked it from enactment.

More to the point, this crisis in agriculture is just a symptom of the broader dysfunction in our broken immigration system. The only real solution to these problems is a comprehensive federal strategy. These state-based efforts are merely costly, counterproductive skirmishes that distract and prevent progress on reforming our immigration system.

## Background of H.B. 87

Georgia had one of the fastest increases in immigrant populations of any state in the last decade. Its Hispanic population nearly doubled from 5.3 percent of the population in 2000 to 8.8 percent in 2010.<sup>11</sup> The stage was set for Republicans to pass an Arizona-style law in 2011 when they deepened their control of the legislature in the 2010 election and supported the election of a governor, Nathan Deal, who talked tough on immigration.

Republican Rep. Matt Ramsey of Peachtree City introduced the Illegal Immigration Reform and Enforcement Act, H.B. 87, at the end of January.<sup>12</sup> Business groups attempted to stop the bill from being passed. Two hundred agribusiness leaders petitioned the legislature in a letter that argued, “our state’s unemployment rate still leads the nation, and we should look for alternatives to adding new costly mandates that could discourage legal job creation.”<sup>13</sup>

To appease skeptical legislators from agriculture-heavy districts, the sponsors of the law included a provision instructing the state Agriculture Department to study the law’s impact on the state’s agricultural production and come up with a solution—possibly including some kind of visiting worker program run by the state—in a report due in January 2012. But no one could stop passage of the bill. And its impacts would be felt much sooner than 2012.

It sailed through the House and Senate even amidst these concerns, and Gov. Deal signed it into law on May 13. On June 27 a federal judge issued a preliminary injunction stopping the harshest provisions of the law from going into effect.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, the damage was done. The ugly debate surrounding the bill’s enactment and the extreme measures in the law served as a giant “Keep Out” sign to migrants formerly lured into the state by “Help Wanted” signs.

## The state is already feeling the pain

The planting season in South Georgia picked up speed at the same time as the legislative train in Atlanta, and the prospect of a hot, dry year caused many Georgia growers to put in early crops. It quickly became apparent that the bill, which was covered by Spanish-language newspapers, television, and radio, was affecting migrant labor patterns even before it was slated to take effect on July 1.<sup>15</sup> Many Hispanic workers were simply bypassing Georgia to take readily available agricultural jobs in Florida, North Carolina, and other states.<sup>16</sup>

Concerned about reports of farm labor shortages, Gov. Deal ordered state Agriculture Commissioner Gary Black to investigate. Black conducted an informal survey of 233 growers, a small fraction of the 47,600 farms in the state. The survey, released in early June, reported a shortage of 11,080 farm workers. But the full losses from an annual workforce of 80,000 who bring in the state's crops could ultimately be far higher.<sup>17</sup>

Farmers on the ground are acutely feeling these shortages. This past spring, for example, a farmer friend in North Carolina told Steve Mullis, a blueberry grower in Georgia, that his labor pool filled up a month early because the migrants had by-passed Georgia. "They sat and waited," Mullis said. "He had more labor in North Carolina than he knew what to do with. Every farmer did."

In Georgia, meanwhile, early season growers were dealing with dramatic labor shortages. Mullis says he and other blueberry growers in his area had a 60 percent labor shortage—even higher than the estimates of 30 percent to 50 percent elsewhere across the fresh produce belt. Mullis says that as a result he pruned off and left between \$400,000 and \$450,000 worth of fruit in his field this year.<sup>18</sup>

The missing hands were in many cases workers who stopped at the same farming operations every year. "I've seen the whole families, I've watched the kids grow up," Mullis said. "They're good people. They leave me and they go straight to Michigan, and when they get through there they go to Washington state to pick apples, and then to Florida."<sup>19</sup>

This year, he said, many migrants drove from Florida through Alabama to get to North Carolina without even going through Georgia. The farmers credit this extreme avoidance in large part to coverage of the Georgia legislation on Spanish-speaking radio and television.<sup>20</sup>

So how is this lack of migrant workers going to affect the state? In mid-June, Bryan Tolar, president of the Georgia Agribusiness Council, which represents more than 700 farms and agribusiness operations, put forth one of the earlier estimates of possible losses. He estimated the monetary loss of unharvested crops due to the lack of migrant workers to be in the range of \$300 million, with an overall impact on the state approaching \$1 billion for 2011 alone.<sup>21</sup>

Tolar said he based his initial estimate on conversations with growers. The \$1 billion figure represents the multiplier effect that agricultural dollars have on local economies, local businesses, and communities as a whole.<sup>22</sup>

But how exactly does the loss of farmhands lead to \$300 million to \$1 billion in economic impact? And what might a future without migrant labor look like in Georgia?

We next turn to these questions.

# Why skilled migrant labor is important for harvesting all-American crops

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## Berries and onions

In their own way, berries are as much an American success story in these hard economic times as Ford or General Motors. Growers in Georgia, Alabama, and Florida have created a new industry over the past decade with innovations that enable more efficient growing and picking.

In Georgia, thanks in part to these innovations, the farm gate value of the blueberry industry quadrupled in less than a decade to more than \$100 million in 2009, the last year for which figures are available. Berries are currently the most profitable of all crops in Georgia's farm economy per acre.<sup>23</sup> Blackberries were not even counted as a crop in the 2003 Georgia Farm Gate report. By 2009 only 630 acres across the entire state were planted in blackberries—less than a typical peanut farm—but their total farm gate value was \$7.9 million.

The value of these fruits only increased as Americans, particularly baby boomers, discovered their antiaging attributes. But this important new industry in Georgia's economy is also fragile and requires skilled agricultural workers to pick the fruit by hand.

We don't often think of migrant laborers as skilled workers, but they are an integral part of the success of the berry economy. In the nervous eyes of fruit and vegetable growers, the ability to quickly spot a berry at the exact stage of ripeness or clip an onion so that it won't spoil before reaching grocery shelves is never underestimated.

At Ben Strickland's blackberry farm in Lanier County, for example, workers are paid based on the number of flats (about 12 pounds) of berries they pick. Strickland would have to make up the difference if their hourly wages ever fell below the \$7.25 minimum wage. But this gap never occurs, according to Strickland, because the crews that work his farm pick fast and expertly enough to make more than double that rate: \$16 an hour or better.<sup>24</sup>

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The sweet Vidalia onion is another star agribusiness performer. It is licensed by the state as an official brand and it can only be grown in a cluster of counties up the road from the berry growers.

But this crop as well relies on skilled pickers. “You may sit behind a desk and say hey, the unemployment rate is 10.2 percent, you can find somebody to harvest onions. Well, in our area, you try finding that,” said Aries Haygood, chairman of the Vidalia Onion Committee. “You [try to] find people that will harvest them, and not only harvest them but do it correctly and do it efficiently.”<sup>25</sup>

Herein lies the double anxiety of growers in Georgia: finding not only the appropriate number of workers but workers skilled enough to bring in a good return on investment. “If I couldn’t get [the berries] picked, I’d lose half a million dollars just in the blink of an eye,” Strickland said.<sup>26</sup> “More than that, really. You get to thinking about all the investments, I’d say it’s over a million dollars.”

The risks, then, without a stable source of migrant labor, are simply too high.

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## Cotton

Cotton further illustrates how easy it can be to underestimate the need for and irreplaceability of migrant labor. It currently has the highest farm gate value of any crop in Georgia with a 2009 value of \$713 million—just more than 6 percent of the total farm gate.<sup>27</sup>

Cotton is a row crop that can be mechanically harvested, and it has no exceptional labor costs associated with growing it—a single farmer on a combine can now do what it once took dozens of workers to do.

But cotton cannot simply be pulled from the ground and sold. It must first go to a gin before a farmer can find a buyer. And the ginning process, which runs only for a few months between early fall and just past Christmas into the New Year, is heavily reliant on migrant labor.

During these months, gin hands work alternating 12-hour shifts, seven days a week. At Ben Evans’s gin in Douglas, they take three days off for Christmas but work right through Thanksgiving. Evans says he’s in his 18th year in the ginning business, and he can count on one hand the non-Hispanic workers he’s employed

in his gin. Some Hispanic workers are employed in gins year round but most are migrants who show up as the season begins in the fall.<sup>28</sup>

Cotton is not a perishable product like blueberries and onions. But it can rot if left to sit long enough in the wrong conditions, Evans said. Moreover, the speed with which cotton moves out of the gin affects nearly everything else in the local economy. When growers don't get paid, neither do their suppliers. Loans don't get repaid and down payments aren't made on new vehicles.

Problems with this year's crop could reduce the need for two shifts this year at the gin. That could somewhat ease the need for additional seasonal labor but affect the bottom line of growers in the area, said Dusty Findley of the Southern Cotton Growers.<sup>29</sup> No one really knows, though, how severe the labor shortage will be until cotton gin workers finished with the earlier season in South Texas either make their way to Georgia as they usually do, or go in another direction, as so many fruit-picking migrant workers did earlier this year.

"I don't know what's going to come on my doorstep, come next September," Evans said in a July interview.<sup>30</sup>

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# Replacing missing migrant labor isn't easy

The natural impulse would be to find American workers to fill the void with such a dearth of migrant laborers. And that is what opponents of immigration reform have been arguing for years.<sup>31</sup> But finding substitute labor is harder than it looks, especially with crop picking that requires specialized labor.

Harvest work is also dangerous, and it means working outdoors in hot conditions often with little breaks or shade. Indeed, a 2010 “Take Our Jobs” campaign by the United Farm Workers union attempted to raise awareness about migrant workers’ role in picking America’s crops by encouraging Americans to take up farm work and facilitating their entrance into it. The program received around 4,000 applicants but only a few dozen Americans ever made it into the fields, highlighting the extreme difficulties involved in farm work.<sup>32</sup>

“I would much prefer to hire American citizens if I can,” said Gerard Krewer, who grows four acres of organic blueberries near St. Mary’s, “but I’m going to do what I have to do in order to make the farm work.” Krewer, a retired University of Georgia agricultural researcher who specialized in the crop he now raises, is in his third growing year on the farm.<sup>33</sup>

Krewer resorted to what he referred to as “the Baptist Mafia” this year after the passage of H.B. 87 made the availability of migrant labor scarce. The “mafia” were 18 high school kids recruited through people he knows out of 40 he interviewed. They did “pretty well,” though their production was very low compared to last year’s crew. He is unsure what he will do next year if migrant workers are still hard to come by.<sup>34</sup>

Gov. Deal proposed using prison parolees to fill the farm vacancies after receiving the legislatively mandated report from the Georgia Department of Agriculture in June citing labor shortages in the state. Deal argued, “I believe [using parolees] would be a great partial solution to our current status.”

But the initiative quickly turned into a debacle. Some parolees walked off the job after only hours and almost none lasted in the fields for more than a week.<sup>35</sup>

Many growers also attempted to hire legal immigrants through the nation's H-2A temporary visa program for foreign agricultural workers. But that program is criticized by growers as too burdensome bureaucratically and by farmworker advocates as inadequate in protecting workers' rights.

A longstanding federal compromise solution, known by its acronym AgJOBS, has been supported by both groups for years. The bill would create a new "Blue Card" visa for migrants who are already working in American agriculture. This proposal would give stability and legal status to undocumented farmworkers and, critically, also contains a pathway to earned permanent status. Even with bipartisan support, however, the bill has been the victim of congressional political gridlock.<sup>36</sup>

# Replacing handpicked crops with machine-picked crops isn't a good solution, either

For years, immigration opponents argued that the best way for America to wean its dependency on migrant labor was to switch from labor-intensive crops that require handpicking to mechanized crops such as peanuts or corn.<sup>37</sup> Some in Georgia are already thinking about such changes. But the shift from one agricultural system to another is not as simple as it sounds. And it could cost the state a significant amount of money.

Farmer Ben Strickland, for example, says the 110 acres he invested in blackberries now generate a third of the income on his 1,600-acre farm where he also raises corn and peanuts. But this year he killed off the old bushes and held off making the new investment because of fears of further labor shortages when it came time to rotate part of his field and put in \$8,000 to \$9,000 in new bushes. He found the 130 to 140 workers needed to pick this year's crop "by the skin of our teeth," but he worries that next year could be worse.

"I'd rather just say the hell with it. If folks want blackberries they can get them from somewhere else," he said.<sup>38</sup>

Berries have one of the highest per-acre farm gate value of any crop in Georgia now. (see Table 2) Producing them, however, requires the growers to invest substantially. An acre of blueberries or blackberries takes tens of thousands of dollars and years to grow with only a few days in which ripened fruit can be harvested. Without the necessary labor, growers such as Strickland may not see the investment as worthwhile to the detriment of the state's economy.

Handpicked crops are shown in Table 2 by most planted, since other crops, for example eggplant, command a higher value but have almost no acreage in Georgia. Machine-picked crops are shown in the table by most valuable, regardless of acreage.

As the table shows, costs per acre, however, diminish significantly with the switch to mechanically picked crops. Virtually all crops are technically capable of being mechanically harvested but delicate fruits and vegetables tend to be handpicked to

**TABLE 2**  
**Handpicked crops bring in far more money than machine-picked crops**

Handpicked vs. machine-picked crops by acreage and value, 2009

Crop	Acres	Per-acre value
<b>Handpicked</b>		
Watermelon	24,238	\$5,734.87
Blueberries	16,346	\$6,268.52
Onions	12,993	\$9,705.82
Peaches	10,212	\$5,830.24
<b>Machine-picked</b>		
Peanuts	529,293	\$757.99
Cotton	1,027,178	\$693.81
Hay	767,966	\$201.99
Soybeans	451,285	\$373.27

Source: Susan R. Boatright and John C. McKissick, "2009 Georgia Farm Gate Value Report," The University of Georgia Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development (Athens, Georgia: May 2010).

obtain their best value. Handpicking produce lets farmers control for ripeness and reduces cosmetic imperfections, which allows these products to be sold for fresh consumption. Machine-picked fruits and vegetables—with a few heartier exceptions such as carrots and potatoes—get too beat up to sell fresh. They thus tend to be sold for processing rather than for immediate consumption, commanding lower prices in the marketplace.

An acre of any of the most prominent handpicked crops, therefore, is worth much more than the most valuable machine-picked crops. Watermelon, for example, is worth 7.5 times as much as the most valuable machine-picked crop, peanuts. (see Table 2)

Table 3 illustrates that Georgia would lose close to \$800 million in farm gate value if it switched all of its handpicked crops—which are currently estimated at just under \$900 million in farm gate value—to a mechanically harvested crop such as peanuts.<sup>39</sup>

Small farmers would bear the brunt of this switch to mechanized crops. The average farm in Georgia is 212 acres—roughly half the national average of 418.<sup>40</sup> Like much of the southeastern United States, Georgia has more small family farms and also more farmers who depend on their crops as a major source of income. Sixty-five percent of American farmers also worked an off-farm job in 2007—in Georgia only about 40 percent did.<sup>41</sup>

The average farmer in Georgia could expect to lose more than \$1.2 million in crop value from switching from handpicked produce to machine-picked peanuts. (see Table 4) This loss would be a devastating blow to most family farms even when taking into account the amount of money that a small farmer would save not having to pay laborers to pick their crops.

One caveat is that these estimates are surely conservative since they do not take into account what it would actually cost to tear out all of the handpicked crops

**TABLE 3**  
**Switching to mechanically harvested crops such as peanuts would cost the state millions**  
 Handpicked vs. machine-picked crops, Georgia statewide

Total acres of handpicked crops	Total value of handpicked crops	Value if replaced with peanuts	Total value lost
134,022	\$898,157,762.00	\$101,587,335.78	\$796,570,426.22

Methodology: The total value for each relevant farm gate commodity was divided by the total number of acres harvested to determine averages of the per acre value for all fruits, nuts, vegetables, row, and forage crops.  
 Source: Boatright and McKissick, "2009 Georgia Farm Gate Value Report."

and replace them with peanuts. They also do not take into account the amount of money that would have to be spent on the machinery and equipment necessary to harvest the crops.

With such a high initial investment, how many small farmers will be able to weather both a loss of \$1.2 million a year in value and have the resources to invest in new equipment? Probably not many. More than one small or specialty grower interviewed for this report—without wishing to be identified—stated their operations will go under if the labor shortage worsens next year.<sup>42</sup>

**TABLE 4**  
**Individual Georgia farmers lose big by switching to mechanically harvested crops**  
 Handpicked vs. machine-picked crops, average Georgia small farm

Average farm acreages	Average per-acre value of handpicked crops	Average value of handpicked crops per small farm	Per-acre value of peanuts	Average value of peanuts per small farm	Average expected loss
212	\$6,701.57	\$1,420,732.84	\$830.53	\$176,072.36	\$1,244,660.48

Methodology: The total value for each relevant farm gate commodity was divided by the total number of acres harvested to determine averages of the per acre value for all fruits, nuts, vegetables, row, and forage crops.  
 Source: Boatright and McKissick, "2009 Georgia Farm Gate Value Report."

# Agricultural malaise ripples throughout the entire economy

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## Local communities feel the squeeze

The impact of lost agricultural workers ripples beyond agricultural profits. It is too early to know the full effects on small communities throughout Georgia but most people do not realize that migrants provide more than just their labor—they also spend a significant amount of money on local goods such as food, groceries, and supplies.

Typically, Steve Mullis, the Bacon County grower and packer, says that a rainy day during blueberry season creates a buzz of activity in the nearby town of Alma. The pickers cannot go back to the fields until rain dries off the berries, so they head to town for groceries, auto parts, and other needs.<sup>43</sup>

To Mullis's surprise, this year things were dead in town when he drove through after a downpour, even at the two Hispanic-owned stores. Those workers who showed up to pick his fields were staying off the roads to avoid possible encounters with law enforcement.<sup>44</sup>

The building where Mullis and his partner operate a blueberry packing plant was a textile mill employing some 1,200 people a couple of decades ago. But that industry is gone and so are a lot of those who worked at the mill. That leaves agribusiness as by far the biggest engine of the local economy. Bacon County's blueberries, for example, generate a \$3.36 million weekly paycheck to its growers when picking season begins in April.<sup>45</sup>

During cotton ginning season at the end of the year, the economic pulse of little towns beats stronger as suppliers also get paid and new purchases are made.

“We have around 70 cotton gins in Georgia. When those people do well, that's good for the local economy in Georgia,” Gary Black, the state agriculture secretary, argued in a recent interview.<sup>46</sup>

Those workers who showed up to pick his fields were staying off the roads to avoid possible encounters with law enforcement.

Migrant workers send some of this earned money back to families at home. But much of what is left they spend locally. Local groceries and convenience stores get by until picking season, and then it is “just like tourist season at the beach,” Mullis said.<sup>47</sup> Yard sales pop up on weekends in little towns, and in Vidalia, the heart of onion country, the parking lot at the local Wal-Mart—which changed its marketing strategy to cater to a Hispanic clientele—is filled with buses on Sunday afternoons transporting workers.

The dollars migrant workers spend before they move on are vital in areas that no longer have the textile mills to sustain them and are feeling the impact of education and state spending cuts. As the economic downturn continues, migrant dollars help prop up towns already feeling the squeeze. Their loss could prove devastating for small-town Georgia.

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## Immigrants in the social fabric

Georgia’s anti-immigration law is bound to affect farming communities in other ways, too. Paul Bridges, the Republican mayor of Uvalda, a small town near Vidalia, attracted national attention for his eloquent description of the way in which, he says, “the social fabric in these communities is being torn.” Bridges recently testified before the U.S. Senate Immigration Subcommittee on the law’s deleterious effects on his town and his state.

On the economic front, Bridges argued that Uvalda would have to rent jail space from a neighboring city for those people who are detained under H.B. 87 since Uvalda has no jail of its own. But more importantly, on the social front, the mayor spoke about the deep disruptions from such anti-immigrant legislation: “Spouses become criminals. Citizen children become criminals” simply for visiting with, or giving a ride to, someone without status.<sup>48</sup>

In rural Georgia towns these days, it is as easy to find a Mexican restaurant as a traditional Southern-style meat-and-three restaurant. That is one sign the Hispanic presence in these areas is more than just seasonal. Several of those interviewed for this report mark the Immigration Reform and Control Act, or IRCA, of 1986 as a turning point. Migrant workers familiar with the area got the proper papers and settled, while tightened border sanctions convinced others to stay on this side of the border permanently.

During harvest season, many of those former immigrants who have lived in the area for two decades or more will join the migrant crews in the fields during harvest season and move on to construction or other jobs during the rest of the year. Often they know the migrants who return to the same areas yearly. Many of the migrants find their way to areas such as St. Mary's by "a sort of extended family situation," said Gerard Krewer, the blueberry grower.

These networks are sure to be disrupted by H.B. 87.<sup>49</sup>

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## Food security at risk

American consumers could be at great risk if the production of high-demand handpicked crops such as berries and Vidalia onions were outsourced to other countries.

Scholars and journalists have argued for years that importing food from elsewhere leaves Americans at risk of safety and quality issues. Recent outbreaks of listeria, salmonella and E. coli remind us that our health depends in large part on the food we eat. Allowing other countries to produce our crops means that we forfeit a critical oversight function and leave our security in the hands of other countries that may not have the same safety and food standards.<sup>50</sup>

Importing more food from elsewhere would also hurt the nascent local food movement. Organizations such as the National Resource Defense Council point out that the transportation costs alone of bringing in food from abroad add to greenhouse gas emissions and other harmful environmental effects. And the Department of Agriculture released a study recently showing that the number of farmers' markets in the country increased significantly over the last year as more and more people tried to "eat locally." These farmers' markets often help keep small farmers in businesses, and by eliminating middlemen from the production, they help keep down the costs of fresh produce.<sup>51</sup>

"I think folks are going to be shocked at the consequences that are going to follow from Georgia's law," Aries Haygood, chairman of the Vidalia Onion Committee, said. "I know it's a tough situation but folks have to put off their political hats and put on their common sense hats. Agriculture is one of our last strong suits. We don't have to rely on anybody else to feed us."<sup>52</sup>

Beyond the health and local issues, outsourcing could mean higher prices and a poorer selection of fresh fruits and vegetables for American consumers. It is already routine to find produce from Mexico or Chile in grocery stores these days—nearly half of fresh fruit and 40 percent of canned fruit eaten in the United States are imported. Similarly, during the 2000 to 2008 period, imports accounted for 15 percent of all vegetable and melon consumption, up from close to half of that rate (8 percent) in the 1990 to 1998 period.<sup>53</sup>

Even domestically there are cost concerns. “Fresh produce is probably the brightest and most hopeful part of our [agricultural] economy in Georgia,” State Rep. Jason Shaw (R-Lakeland) said. “We’re poised to basically take over the East Coast fresh produce market, because if you think about the carbon footprint issues and the freight costs, all that produce grown in California, they can’t bring that here and sell it for a competitive price. And then Florida’s got so many restrictions and land costs are so high, we’re sitting in one of the best places in the country to have a good product that we can grow and make money.”<sup>54</sup>

Much depends on the impact of the immigration laws passed in neighboring South Carolina and Alabama. Florida considered but failed to pass a restrictive immigration law this year, but Gov. Rick Scott has pledged to make it a priority next year.

There is already evidence that Alabama is beginning to see similar labor losses.<sup>55</sup> South Carolina’s law does not go into effect until the beginning of next year, at which time we expect there will be similar shortages.

The Georgia law is harming the state’s agricultural economy and having wider repercussions. Apple growers in Michigan have reported fewer workers than they are used to seeing in late summer. These changes occur through a combination of factors, such as labor brokers canceling entire circuits, or simply the fact that the disruption of the normal patterns of migration means that those destinations at the end of the line, like Michigan, lose out. A salesman for a Michigan produce grower called the potential impact of the Georgia law on his state “a little unnerving.”<sup>56</sup>

The vast industry that tends the nation’s fields is a wonder of modern productivity. But it is struggling to respond to a changing climate, an uncertain economy, and soaring energy demands. Growers, who think the challenges facing agriculture are little understood, believe this season’s lost crops represent only a portion of the costs associated with the rippling effects of the law.

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“The iceberg has just been tipped,” Kevin Coggins, general manager of Coggins Farms, a large farming and packaging operation with holdings on both sides of the Georgia-Florida state line, said. “There isn’t anything that revolves around eating that doesn’t involve migrant labor.”<sup>57</sup>

# Conclusion

Migrant labor, by virtue of its mobility, touches many links in the complicated network that brings ripe sliced watermelons and shucked sweet corn to our dinner tables. The impact of Georgia's law and other restrictive immigration laws is only beginning to be felt on this network. In Georgia the effects are already apparent, and in rural communities already struggling to survive, the effects could be devastating.

It is unclear whether or not Georgia ultimately will be able to weather the effects of H.B. 87. It depends on whether migrant workers return to the fields in the coming years and if farmers decide to pull up their handpicked crops and replace them with mechanized ones. Still, the losses from this year alone could spell the difference between economic recovery in Georgia or further stagnation.

The country has a similar choice to make as Georgia, especially if other agriculture-heavy states pass similar legislation. There are two routes to take: states can switch to mechanically grown crops at heavy losses to their economies, or they can work to stabilize their workforce. Georgia shows that the current migrant labor system is unstable and deeply affected by the legislative currents of individual states.

How can we as a nation make the smart choices that will ensure continued economic success as well as a stable workforce? Two options are readily apparent.

The first is a narrow solution addressing the unique concerns of the agricultural industry that has been on the table for 10 years in the form of a federal bill known as AgJOBS. It would enable the current undocumented agricultural workforce to earn legal status and create a stable, legal, protected temporary labor force into the future. This legislation has received bipartisan support in the past, as well as the support of growers and farmworker groups.

The second option is federal immigration reform legislation that addresses the current undocumented population, future legal immigration, border security, and

Georgia shows that the current migrant labor system is unstable and deeply affected by the legislative currents of individual states.

worksite enforcement. It is the only long-term solution to the manifold challenges presented by our broken immigration system. Agriculture presents a discreet set of challenges but they are only a subset of a broader array of workforce and integration concerns related to large-scale undocumented migration.

Comprehensive immigration reform would require the undocumented population to register, learn English, pay taxes, and earn legal status. It would also establish flexible and realistic legal channels for future economic migration and address the separate demands created by family-based immigration.

A fully legal workforce would not be prone to the same instability as the current migrant worker system. And it would help ensure economic stability in both the agriculture and other migrant-dependent sectors. To date, both AgJOBS and more comprehensive proposals have fallen prey to the partisan gridlock in Washington.

Legislators in other states would be wise to learn from the effects of Georgia's anti-immigration law as they begin to prepare for the 2012 legislative session and contemplate copying Georgia's bill.

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## About the author

**Tom Baxter** has been a journalist in Georgia for 36 years. He was national editor and later chief political correspondent at The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, and since 2007 has been editor of the Southern Political Report. He is currently a fellow at the Robert J. Dole Institute of Politics at the University of Kansas.

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