

AL Considers Inmates To Replace Immigrant Labor

Jay Reeves, Associated Press

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (AP) — Alabama agriculture officials are considering whether prisoners can fill a chronic labor shortage the farm agency blames on the state's new law against illegal immigration.

Brett Hall, a deputy commissioner with the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries, said planting season is coming up in south Alabama, and some growers fear most of their usual workers have left the state because of the law.

The nursery and landscape industry will need as many as 4,000 workers in southern counties early in 2012 to get ready for the growing season, he said, and forestry and farming will require still more laborers. Unable to find legal residents to fill all the employment gaps, Hall said the Agriculture Department is consulting with the Department of Corrections to determine whether prisoners could do some of the work.

"We're trying to get ahead of the curve and see if we can be of assistance to other parts of Alabama, too," Hall said Monday, a day before the agency held a meeting Tuesday afternoon with farmers and agriculture industry officials in Mobile.

Prison spokesman Brian Corbett said the state has about 2,000 work-release prisoners who could be eligible to perform such work, and the department is "always happy to promote our ... program to employers as an alternative labor situation." Work-release inmates aren't the solution to labor shortages that may be linked to the law, however, according to Corbett.

"Many, if not most, of those 2,000 are already employed," he said.

Farmers have complained of a lack of field hands since parts of the law took effect in late September. Many have said legal residents aren't physically able or mentally tough enough to perform the work, and others won't do so because it doesn't pay enough.

Hall said the agriculture positions pay well above minimum wage, but many Americans find them too "physically taxing" to perform.

An Internet-based program launched by the state in October to help connect farmers with potential workers has yet to produce results.

A state website located at www.joblink.alabama.gov allows employers to post available jobs they need filled, and potential employees can browse the listings looking for work.

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Tara Hutchison, a spokeswoman with the Department of Industrial Relations, said 70 temporary agriculture jobs are posted on the site, most for work that begins in January, and about 500 people have signed up indicating interest in work. She said the department doesn't know of anyone who has been hired, although it's been told one person has been promised a job beginning in January.

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