

Farmers weigh in on bill allowing permits for field workers

The Associated Press

To some Merced County farmers, a bill that would allow farmworkers who live in the country illegally to get work permits could be a solution to labor shortages.

Merced-area farmers said the proposal makes sense for their businesses because it would help widen the pool of field workers, the Merced Sun Star reports Saturday (<http://bit.ly/1fTZ90t>).

The bill being considered by California legislators would establish a program for field workers who already live in the state without authorization instead of granting a temporary work visa to foreign laborers as existing programs do. Under the bill, the workers, their spouses and children who are in school could remain in the state without the threat of deportation.

Farmer Marc Marchini of J. Marchini Farms in Le Grand said that, depending on the season, it can be very difficult to find good labor.

Picking crops, he said, is not a glorified job, and many U.S.-born citizens are not willing to work in the fields. It is extremely difficult work and requires time to develop the skill, he said.

"We have to pull from the labor pools of those willing to work," he said.

Atwater farmer Bob Weimer said the bill would make it easier for California to keep track of the number of farmworkers available and needed, even if many immigrants living here illegally already work in the fields.

In Merced, about 43 percent of the county's illegal immigrant population works in agriculture, according to data released earlier this year by the University of Southern California's Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration.