



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on November 9, 2011

Labor Shortage May Leave Washington Apples on the Trees

Apple growers in Washington State — who produce about half of the country's apples, about 15 billion — have a bumper crop this year, among the best in the state's history. Yet many of these apples may never make it to market, because growers cannot find enough workers to pick them.

Estimates are that almost 70 percent of these seasonal workers are illegal immigrants from Mexico. According to a [CNS News](#) report,

Farmers say an immigration crackdown by the federal government and states such as Arizona and Alabama scared off many more workers. They have tried to replace them with domestic workers with little success.



Mike Gempler, a farm labor contractor in Washington, says: "We've been dealing with this for a number of years now, and until something changes at the federal level, growers are going to struggle having enough workers." Governor Christine Gregoire recently traveled to Washington, D.C. with 15 apple growers to ask for Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform, which she claims would solve the problems of her states apple growers.

She asserted, "Our problem now is: How do we get it [the fruit] off the trees? We don't have a work force, and that is at the doorstep of the federal government.

Analysts have noted that the term "comprehensive immigration reform" is a euphemism for de facto amnesty for millions of illegal aliens.

Jeff Pheasant and Darla Grubb, brother and sister who are fourth-generation apple growers east of Seattle, say that their business, Pheasant Orchards, has only about 50 pickers to collect the apple crop rather than their usual 65, and many of them are not experienced. Darla points out, You have to have people [to harvest the fruit]. They're the reason we have fruits and vegetables. We couldn't do this without our workers."

Washington apple growers say that they have faced a labor shortage for many years now. Pickers wanted signs are familiar along the state's roads.

CNS News says, "Some critics say growers would have enough workers if they paid more." The unemployment rate in Washington State for September 2011 was 9.1 percent, or the 16th worst in the nation. Jobs there pay at least the state minimum wage of \$8.65 per hour, but many orchards offer higher wages based on the actual number of apples picked.



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There are so few takers for the jobs that Washington's correctional system has sent inmates to pick the fruit at a cost to the state of \$22 an hour to cover transportation, food, housing, and related expenses. So far, however, only one orchard has accepted the Governors offer of inmate labor.



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