A US labour shortage looms

Thursday, 18. May 2017

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In California and the Pacific Northwest, the grape vines began waking up in April. Buds burst open and the yearly cycle of vineyard work shifted into high gear, with skilled workers tying the young buds for support, positioning shoots for optimal growth, and other tasks. For several years now, those skilled workers have been hard to find, but this year it seemed especially hard to get hands on the vines, according to many reports.

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According to research from the Pew Institute, there was a peak of 6.9m unauthorized immigrants from Mexico in 2007, a decade ago. That number fell to 5.8m by 2015 and is still declining.

Hourglass Winery is a super-premium Napa winery with bottle prices topping well over $100.00. Jeff Smith, one of the winery founders, said that he had no experience with mechanical harvesting at Hourglass. He had, however, talked with his winemaker about it. "He was so frustrated scheduling pick dates last harvest that he brought up the idea of mechanically harvesting," he said. "The topic was broached out of frustration, but it highlights that some of our best winemakers are pondering it. At our level, I don't think it's appropriate yet, but with advances in technology, over time, who knows? As labour costs go up, more efforts will be put into mechanical solutions."

There are several reasons for the decline, with the threat of deportation one. Perhaps the most important, however, is the booming economy in Mexico. When there are jobs at home, why risk the dangerous journey north to find work? Also, the crackdown on undocumented immigrants has been going on since 2008. According to some sources, one being Global Nation, produced by Public Radio International, there are now more undocumented Mexicans leaving the US than entering. Turns out the border is a two-way street.