Getting to the root of the matter.

By Lucas Sjostrom, Contributing Editor

With looming issues like the budget and gun control, one can’t blame the political pundits for being wrong about immigration reform’s poor chances of reaching the surface. But just weeks into the current Congress, both the Democrat-controlled Senate and President Obama came forward with proposals on immigration reform. Helping matters, the two proposals are similar.

Better yet, Roll Call, a D.C. newspaper, reported that a previously secret bipartisan immigration group is also on the cusp of striking a deal in the House of Representatives. If enacted, these proposals would bring forward many of the 11 million undocumented workers thought to be living in the shadows of American society.

Mexico, as one might predict, was the origin of 62 percent of the U.S. unauthorized immigrant population in 2009, according to the Department of Homeland Security. El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras trail far behind with 5, 4 and 3 percent of the projected count.

In Minnesota, the Pew Hispanic Center estimated that 1.6 percent of the 2010 population and 2.1 percent of the labor force were illegal immigrants. This compares to Nevada, California and Texas, all of which claim about 7 percent of their population, and up to 10 percent of the labor force, as undocumented workers. Measures like that prove that immigration reform isn’t just important to businesses and industries, but also to communities and entire states.

ALL BUSINESSES ARE AFFECTED

Comprehensive immigration reform is also important to the Minnesota Agri-Growth Council. Done properly, it will rebuild the national system and supersede the patchwork of immigration regulations that has been developing among the states. Current haphazard laws make it hard for employers and potential employees to comply with all facets of every statute.

Some of the 11 million undocumented workers are willing to do the tough jobs that others won’t. Many of those “tough” jobs are in the food and agriculture industry. The American Farm Bureau Federation estimates that 20 percent of U.S. fresh fruit, vegetable and nursery production would shift to other countries if we lost migrant labor.

Better yet, Roll Call, a D.C. newspaper, reported that a previously secret bipartisan immigration group is also on the cusp of striking a deal in the House of Representatives. If enacted, these proposals would bring forward many of the 11 million undocumented workers thought to be living in the shadows of American society.

The words “migrant labor,” often make one think of workers picking vegetables in California. But today’s truck drivers, restaurant line cooks, and hotel service people are also often foreign-born. That’s why Agri-Growth is teamed with seven other organizations to form the Minnesota Business Immigration Coalition (MnBIC) several years ago.

Another MnBIC member is the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber represents over 2,400 Minnesota businesses of all types and sizes. Bill Blazar, the Chamber’s Senior Vice President of Public Affairs and Business Development, said his organization’s membership has been concerned about immigration reform for several years; however, much more so in recent years.

The Chamber joined MnBIC because it feels immigration reform is vital to meet the growing and complex needs of the state’s economy. Blazar explained, “Minnesota has an aging population, a lot of people retiring, plus a rapidly changing economy that requires a variety of skills. We’re also more and more a part of the world economy. When you put those three things together, immigrant workers become a key part of the work force.”

Agri-Growth Welcomes a New Writer

Agri-Growth is happy to introduce Lucas Sjostrom as our contributing editor for the Minnesota Agri-Growth Council newsletter. Lucas recently returned to Minnesota and is pursuing his master’s degree in dairy management at the University of Minnesota’s St. Paul Campus and West Central Research and Outreach Center. Sjostrom previously served as an associate editor with Hoard’s Dairyman magazine, a national dairy farm magazine based in Wisconsin. There, Sjostrom wrote and sourced articles for the industry’s most widely read dairy magazine and orchestrated their social media and website efforts. He has visited dairy farms in 32 states to date.

Sjostrom grew up on a dairy and crop farm in Nicollet county. He hopes to continue working with farmers and helping them succeed, as he has since graduating from the U of M in 2009 with an animal science degree. He now lives on his parents-in-law’s dairy farm in Stearns county with his wife, Alise, and newborn daughter, Lucy.

Immigration Reform Peeks from the Shadows

Giving undocumented workers, and employers, some certainty on foreign workers’ future would help the entire country.

By Lucas Sjostrom, Contributing Editor
Member In Focus

Company: Minnesota Rural Electric Association
Website: www.mrea.org • Location: Maple Grove, MN

The Minnesota Rural Electric Association (MREA) is a service organization for Minnesota’s electric utility cooperatives. MREA provides service and leadership including safety training, legislative research and lobbying, and industry education programs. A fourteen-member board representing electric co-ops across the state governs MREA.

MREA’s members, forty-four electric distribution cooperatives and six generation and transmission co-ops in Minnesota, serve 741,000 customer meters or about 1.8 million people, covering 85 percent of the geographic area of the state. These cooperatives are locally-owned and operated by boards of directors, who are elected by the consumer-members they serve. The cooperatives seek to provide electric energy to rural consumers at the lowest possible cost consistent with sound management. They also promote and fund economic development initiatives to create jobs and maintain a high standard of living for rural and suburban Minnesota residents.

Power plants serving Minnesota’s electric co-ops are among the most efficient in the country. Abiding by conservation statutes, Minnesota co-ops spend more than the required amount of their annual gross operating revenues on energy conservation and load management programs. The load management program controls more than 500 MW of energy use, the equivalent of operating one less large power plant.

Q & A with Joel Johnson, Director of Government Affairs:

What is new at MREA?
Technology is rapidly changing the way we produce and distribute electricity, and MREA continues to help Minnesota’s 44 electric cooperatives stay abreast of those changes and adapt to a changing energy market trends.

The cost of energy remains a key component to economic strength. We want to make sure that Minnesota, and in particular – outstate Minnesota, remains competitive when it comes to electric costs.

What are the key trends affecting your industry?
New technology, increased state and federal regulation and declining energy demand have created a challenging environment for electric cooperatives. Our goals remain the same – providing abundant, safe and affordable energy to our members – but the challenge is to keep electricity affordable and competitive, particularly in more rural areas.

What are your legislative priorities?
We are concerned over the current push to increase the subsidies for small, distributed generation, particularly through net metering, which requires utilities to purchase any excess generation from small wind or solar installations at retail prices. Current law not only allows individuals to “net” or offset their own energy use, but forces their neighbors to pay for their solar panels or wind generator through above market rates. Because infrastructure costs are embedded in kwh rates, net-metered accounts also avoid paying for the infrastructure costs that are required to supply them with energy when their generators isn’t producing electricity and to distribute their excess energy to the grid. We believe the state’s net-metering laws should be updated to avoid the excessive subsidization from other cooperative members.

We also are pushing for the state to adopt standards for the measuring and mitigating of stray voltage on farms. Minnesota currently leads the nation in the number of stray voltage complaints in the court system. In nearly all of these cases, the cooperatives involved have repeatedly visited the farm site, but have been unable to find any measurable stray voltage.

Establishing standards for measuring and mitigating legitimate stray voltage complaints – either through legislation or a PUC ruling – will help dairy farmers and cooperatives avoid costly litigation. The standard would make utilities accountable if they didn’t respond to complaints properly, but also protect them from frivolous complaints.

Other issues:
• Taxes: As the state continues to face serious budget issues, we would like to remind policy makers that generating revenue through electric bills is extremely regressive for individuals and families and makes it harder for Minnesota businesses to compete.
• Renewable Energy Mandates and Carve-Outs: Meeting the 25x25 Renewable Energy Standard has already been extremely costly for cooperative members. Adding more renewable energy mandates or carve-outs will only increase those costs.

The Minnesota Agri-Growth Council is an advocate for the state’s food and agriculture industry. Founded in 1968, the Council is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that represents the shared interests of its 200-plus members, which include food and agriculture businesses, organizations and producers, as well as the service industries that support them.
Immigration Reform Peeks from the Shadows, Continued From Page 1

Blazar says immigrant workers have skills that reach the entire spectrum of the economy. “They also tend to be younger than the general population,” he added, “which addresses the demographic issue. Because of their diverse backgrounds, immigrant labor helps Minnesota understand and become a greater part of the world economy.”

Originally, the agribusiness sector of the Chamber started the march towards comprehensive immigration reform, but today it is a membership-wide problem. “I now hear as much concern from the medical technology industry as I hear from agribusiness,” Blazar explained. “Financial services are in the same situation. It’s becoming a factor in every sector of Minnesota’s economy.”

The Minnesota Chamber of Commerce focuses mostly on state issues. Before immigration, health care was the last federal issue the Minnesota Chamber took a stand in, and that was in 2009 and 2010. “That we’re involved at all,” Blazar described, “is testament to what we’re hearing from our members on how important the issue is to the development and growth of the state’s economy.”

The Minnesota Business Immigration Coalition started six years ago because immigration reform was a top federal issue to so many businesses and organizations, although individual firms weren’t talking publicly about it. In part, that’s because of concerns regarding their relationships with regulatory authorities and other immigration affiliations. As the associations’ leadership realized this, they decided to work together and form the coalition. Today, MnBIC’s work gives a voice to an issue many companies have a hard time commenting on individually.

**DAIRIES HIT ESPECIALLY HARD**

Minnesota is home to just under 4,000 dairy farms, and every single one milks their cows two or three times per day. But dairy workers are hard to find, according to Pat Lunemann, a Clarissa, MN, dairy producer and president of the Minnesota Milk Producers Association (MMPA).

“There really is no visa program for dairies,” explains Lunemann. The H-2A agricultural visa program through the U.S. Department of Labor does allow for work that is temporary or seasonal in nature. But workers on dairy farms fit neither the “seasonal” or “temporary” labels.

Despite this, a 2009 report by the National Milk Producers Federation found that, of the farms surveyed, 50 percent of cows and 62 percent of the milk came from farms using immigrant labor. That equates to 41 percent of the dairy workforce. But these aren’t minimum wage jobs. Dairy labor averages $10 per hour or $31,500 per year with benefits in rural communities across the country.

While foreign labor on dairy farms may have previously been an issue for just a small percentage of farms, today it affects every single one. “And it’s not just on the farm,” Lunemann contends. Packing plants, utilized by both the dairy and beef cattle industries, are facing similar circumstances.

Lunemann thinks the American work ethic has definitely changed in recent years. He employed a handful of high school students, including his oldest son, until May 2002 when they left for college. To replace them, Pat hired eight new high school workers, hoping three or four would pan out. Only one stuck with the work, and today he no longer sees high school students applying for work at his farm.

Instead, dairy farmers often hire immigrant labor. The current situation puts dairies and other employers in a tough position. There is a chance that their papers are not genuine. But, due to employment discrimination laws, employers must assume them as legitimate documents. If employees are lying and the government finds out, that could result in a raid and fines by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

A round-up of workers for deportation can inhibit any business, but on a dairy farm cows need to be milked again just 8 or 12 hours later. “It’s very frustrating,” Lunemann said. That’s why MMPA pegs immigration reform as a top national issue, second after securing a new farm bill.

**FAMILIES LIVING IN THE DARK**

“These people need to be brought out of the shadows,” insists Daryn McBeth, President of the Minnesota Agri-Growth Council, reminding us that the immigrant employees also stand to benefit from comprehensive reform. “They need clarity and certainty in their status. That is helpful to employers, workers and their families, and rural communities in Minnesota and across the country.”

Agri-Growth and MnBIC see comprehensive immigration reform with three pillars. The first is a pathway to legal participation for the 11 million undocumented workers that are already here. This step should be timely and affordable for immigrants and their families, and should lead to permanent residency for those without criminal convictions.

Integrity in the system is a second pillar, allowing for an accurate employer-friendly verification system that is affordable and accessible for businesses of all sizes. The organizations believe the system can be set up in a manner in which employers are neither discrimina-

**Continued on Page 4**
tory nor playing human resources enforcers. To have integrity in the system, we also need to be working towards a secure border so that undocumented workers are eventually a term of the past.

The third and final pillar is a system that adapts to the changing economy. An ideal system would create rules that allow for expansion and contraction of the immigration flow with a temporary work visa program. As illustrated already, dairy farms could be an immediate benefactor of this system. This could eliminate the long lines that migrant workers currently face – lines they sometimes avoid by obtaining fake documents.

Comprehensive immigration reform is finally moving. However, between the current drafts unveiled by the President and Senate, Agri-Growth prefers the President’s plan. Currently, the Senate measure has onerous provisions that include waiting for some reforms based on border security measures.

“Can’t wait,” insists McBeth. “Whatever we work out for getting undocumented workers on the track to visas or citizenship needs to start happening now. We shouldn’t wait for 100 percent border security, or anything else.”

Minnesota’s Congressional delegation currently looks to be in favor of comprehensive immigration reform, with only three of the ten opposed. According to Minnesota Public Radio’s 2012 election coverage, Representatives Walz (D-MN1), McCollum (D-MN4), Ellison (D-MN5), Nolan (D-MN7) and Peterson (D-MN8) would support comprehensive immigration reform. Representatives McCollum, Ellison, and Nolan support reform as a pathway to citizenship. Senators Klobuchar and Franken are also in favor of comprehensive reform that could lead to citizenship. Meanwhile, Representatives Walz and Peterson support major reforms to improve the current system for foreign workers and employers.

But Representatives Kline (R-MN2), Paulsen (R-MN3) and Bachmann (R-MN6) opposed President Obama’s plan to not deport standing immigrants who came to the U.S. under age 16 through the “DREAM Act.” The “DREAMers” included in the act have earned high school diplomas, general education degrees (GED), or served in the military, and do not have criminal records.

The organizations involved in MnBIC agree that immigration should be kept at the federal level. To date, there has been no push for stand-alone legislation in Minnesota. If anything, McBeth thinks there may be some movement on a DREAM-type act at the state level. Since that would expedite the process for some of the undocumented workers, MnBIC is in favor of such legislation.

“The political tea leaves, after what the Republicans went through in the last election, show that everyone is more serious about immigration reform,” McBeth explained. “I think there’s a decent chance of passage in the next two-year cycle.”

President Obama has been critcized by some in his base for a slow start on immigration reform, according to McBeth. While he aimed for a two-pronged approach of a tighter border paired with the comprehensive immigration reform, he only succeeded on the enforcement side.

McBeth thinks that may be different in the second term. “We may have floor debate later this year or early next year. That is saying a lot since we are competing with major issues like gun control and the budget.”

No longer a dream, comprehensive immigration reform could soon be a help to businesses everywhere. Stay engaged by letting your elected officials know that you support reform on the national level.