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Competing voices in GOP on immigrant laborers

By Susan Ferriss - Bee Staff Writer

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Placer County GOP chief Tom Hudson says it's OK if the state's agribusiness shrinks if it means not hiring foreign workers. Sacramento Bee/Anne Chadwick Williams

Republican activist Tom Hudson has fighting words for farmers and others who say they can't survive without hiring foreign workers.

"If the only way you can stay in business is to break the law -- or to import Third World workers to compete with American workers -- then you shouldn't be in business," said Hudson, 40, GOP chairman of the county that claims to be California's most Republican, Placer County.

"You should," Hudson declared, "go bye-bye."



Remarks like that disgust Joanne Neft, another Placer County Republican -- who has long worked for farm businesses.

"Tom Hudson needs to put on work pants and boots, and go out and do a day's work on a farm," said Neft, 71.

Instead, Hudson, a tax attorney, will travel to the California Republican convention this weekend in Indian Wells. There, he said, expect to see a push for the state GOP to adopt a position of "no amnesty" for illegal immigrants as part of its platform.

That would be an aggressive step beyond the party's current stance favoring legal immigration. The push may fail, Hudson said, but he's convinced that hammering on illegal immigrants -- no earned legal status ever, no guest workers -- is the greatest issue the party can embrace to earn future votes.

Greater than no new taxes, said Hudson, tax counsel for the state Board of Equalization.

Some employers fed up

From GOP presidential hopefuls to state activists, many Republicans are savoring the defeat last spring of immigration overhaul legislation and continuing to wage rhetorical war on illegal immigrants.

The problem for the party is that the new attacks are being lobbed at some of the employers who have consistently been a strong base of GOP support -- and those employers are fed up with the party's toughening positions on immigration.

Hudson and others, those employers say, are exploiting xenophobia and ignorance of limitations in the visa system. They blame cries for "enforcement only" -- and no importation of "Third World workers" -- for jeopardizing their livelihood.

"I'm tired of people calling me a bad actor," said Chico industrial landscaper Cathy Gurney, another Republican. Lawmakers she once supported, Gurney said, have failed to defend small businesses like hers. She said U.S. citizens are hard to recruit, even though she pays above minimum wage, offers health insurance and follows all tax rules.

In 1994, farmers and others who employ immigrant workers fretted quietly -- if at all -- about Proposition 187, the initiative spearheaded by Republican Gov. Pete Wilson that sought to ban illegal immigrant kids from public schools. Today, they're feeling the heat more personally because this time employers are in the crosshairs.

Farmer backs AgJOBS

The debate tends to pit those who work side by side with immigrants against those who have little personal contact with foreign workers, or who view illegal immigrants solely as lawbreakers and a drain on public services.

Manuel Cunha, a Fresno-area fruit farmer, Republican and son of Portuguese immigrants, once campaigned vigorously for GOP candidates.

Now he's a fan of California Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein, with whom he's worked -- along with the United Farm Workers union -- to try to pass an immigration overhaul bill for agribusiness. The proposal, AgJOBS, would legalize current undocumented farm laborers who remain in the fields for three to five years. It would later admit temporary workers to fill future needs.

Cunha had choice words for activists like Hudson, calling them "so-called Republican leaders."

"I hope he enjoys bringing in food from foreign countries," Cunha said.

Hudson has a ready comeback. "It's entirely possible," he said, that losing foreign workers would decrease the size of California agribusiness. But that's OK, Hudson said, because the free market will provide.

"There are lots of businesses we don't have in California," he said. "Californians buy shoes, and I can assure you there's not a shoe factory in California."

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