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Bashing the immigrant while he feeds us

Just as soon as Rep. Raul Labrador jumped into Idaho's 1st Congressional District campaign, the illegal immigration issue jumped right in there with him. Labrador, R-Eagle, is challenging Iraq War veteran Vaughn Ward in next year's GOP primary for the right to face U.S. Rep. Walt Minnick, D-Idaho. Labrador is an immigration attorney, and one of Ward's supporters, state Sen. Mike Jorgenson, R-Hayden Lake, was only too happy to point that out.

It remains to be seen whether Labrador's professional stance on illegal immigration is at odds with his public views. But Jorgenson is throwing red meat to the nativist element of the Republican Party. It immediately puts Labrador on the defensive. What you won't hear - from Labrador or anyone else running for office - is the brutal truth about undocumented workers in this country. We need them. Our economy - even as recession-battered as it is - can't survive without the 11 million to 13 million people working and living in the United States illegally. Among them are an estimated 40,000 in Idaho and 225,000 in the state of Washington. Agriculture would collapse. The Pew Hispanic Center says one of every four farm workers is undocumented. Elsewhere, the Pew Center says people living illegally in the U.S. account for:

- 19 percent of those who maintain buildings and grounds.
- 17 percent of construction workers.
- 12 percent of food preparation and service help.
- 10 percent of production employees.
- 7 percent of transportation workers.
- 5.4 percent of the overall civilian labor force.

The idea that anyone is going to locate, detain and then deport that many people is ludicrous. Even anti-immigration critics say they'll settle for a policy of attrition in which the border is sealed and the number of undocumented workers slowly recedes. What happens if these workers do so? It doesn't follow that American citizens - even those who are unemployed - are willing to take their places in lower-paying, physically-demanding jobs. What's more likely to happen is another economic shock wave.

Cited by Americans for Immigration Reform, a study conducted by The Perryman Group says kicking illegal immigrants out of the country would cost the economy \$551 billion in annual sales, \$245 billion in annual output and the jobs of another 2.8 million citizens and legal residents.

In Idaho, the loss of undocumented workers would cost the economy \$1.3 billion. In Washington, the loss would come to \$46.2 billion. Advocates of legitimate immigration reform - from former President George W. Bush to former Idaho Sen. Larry Craig - have focused on some path toward citizenship for the millions already here. That's anathema to people who believe reform would reward lawbreakers. Nevertheless, the status quo means more people living in the shadows, subject to exploitation and abuse at the hands of unscrupulous employers. It means more depressed wages for other workers. And it exposes vulnerable segments of the economy to disruptions and labor shortages. Which is where we'll remain if working as an immigration attorney remains a punching bag in Idaho politics. - M.T.