

**This letter was published in The News-Herald November 17, 2007:**

Dear Editor,

Imagine a quiet Spring...a Spring without nurseries in Lake County.

There would still be the sounds of red-tailed hawks and clear-running streams, because the nurseries would leave behind a healthy environment, broad open areas with clean air and tilled soils rich with leaves from nearby neighborhoods. But the tractors would be gone. The orderly rows of hemlocks and daylilies. The digging crews and the loading crews and the office staff.

All this, gone from our communities.

The first nursery began here in 1853. By 1856 there were two. They decided to become partners, noting that there was not room for two nurseries in Lake County. Today, 100 nurseries operate on 5000 acres providing \$100 million in sales and 2700 jobs to the local economy. And each nursery job supports 3.5 other jobs: mechanics, store-owners, nurses, teachers.

Imagine what it would be like ten years after the nurseries are gone, with homes and chain-stores where rows of trees and shrubs once grew. Imagine the demand on roads and sewers and other services. Nurseries cost their communities 34 cents for every dollar they pay in taxes. Residential areas cost \$1.40. Our communities would have to work even harder to attract industry to our area. But would industry be as good a neighbor as the nurseries? Would we be willing to *pay* to keep the open spaces?

Just because nurseries have been here for over 150 years does not mean that it will always be so. Over 150,000 acres of farmland in Ohio have been lost to development over the past two years. At a recent meeting with local growers, the Ohio Agriculture Director suggested, 'if you save the farmer, you save the farm'. Providing farmers and nurseries with an economic and political environment conducive to continued investment is the way to support Ohio's top industry. Everyone wants to do this. The problem is, the biggest issue facing nurseries today is finding and retaining a dedicated and legal workforce. And this brings us to Agricultural Jobs legislation and solving the immigration dilemma.

Nursery work is seasonal, repetitive and physically demanding. Many jobs today, as nurseries automate wherever possible, require special training. Historically, many of these jobs have been filled by immigrants, from Holland, Ireland, Italy, Puerto Rico and, most recently, Mexico.

For years nurseries have conscientiously followed the federal hiring rules, a time-consuming process requiring employers to review specific documentation for each worker, even though there was no way to verify authenticity. For years our government seemed more interested in maintaining the flow of taxes from our workers rather than verifying residency status. For years, our leaders would decry the presence of undocumented workers but do nothing about it.

Now the national spotlight has shifted. Impassioned voices argue for mass deportations, on the one side, or a process of legalization, on the other. Without any solution from Congress, federal agencies are sending 'mismatch' letters to all employers, not just agricultural, who have workers with questionable social security numbers. No one knows what the impact will be. But employers will only have sixty days to resolve the mismatches or let workers go. Even businesses that do not receive mismatch letters will be affected by turmoil in the labor pool.

Here is what nurseries want.

We want an immigration policy that is enforceable and makes sense.

We want an equitable and uncomplicated guest-worker program that provides legal workers at a fair wage for years to come.

We want time to address the impact of changes to the current system.

There is a bill in congress (SB340 HR 371) that would fix some of the problems with the existing guest-worker programs (H2A, H2B) and provide more time to comply with mismatch letters.

Please let your elected officials in Washington know you support the nursery industry and support passage of the Agricultural Jobs legislation.

We want to remain your neighbors for years to come!

Mark Gilson

President

Nursery Growers of Lake County Ohio