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Editorial

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Guest-worker program is vital to U.S.

A guest-worker program is a hard sell in a recession. But, let's face it, the unemployed in Phoenix aren't taking buses to the lettuce fields of Yuma.

"Is Russell Pearce's daughter going to work in the hotels, changing beds?" asks former U.S. Rep. Jim Kolbe. The United States needs immigration workers at both the high and low end of the pay scale.

Here's why:

U.S. Census Bureau population projections to 2050 show a decrease in the proportion of people ages 18 to 64 in the country, and a big increase in those older than 65. Things get even grayer when projections are based on zero-net immigration.

In its November issue, *Foreign Policy* magazine reports that by midcentury, the global population of children younger than 5 is projected to fall by 49 million, but the population of those older than 60 will increase by 1.2 billion. "In the not-so-distant future, the United States may well find itself competing for immigrants rather than building walls to keep them out," Phillip Longman writes in the magazine.

The National Center for Education Statistics projects double-digit increases in the percentage of the U.S. population holding higher-education degrees by 2018. Tamar Jacoby, president and CEO of ImmigrationWorks USA, a national federation of small-business owners working for immigration reform, says half the American men in the workforce were high-school dropouts in 1960. Today it's about 6 percent.

Older, better-educated people do not pick lettuce. Migrants do.

"These workers are going to pick these fruits and vegetables; the only question is which side of the border are they going to pick them on?" Jacoby says.

This question has both security and economic implications.

Jason Resnick, general counsel for the Western Growers Association, says farms in Yuma are increasingly planting acreage in Mexico where workers are plentiful. That means less demand in Arizona communities for all the supplies farms need, and less control in the United States over its food supply. The H2A visa program for foreign agricultural workers is cumbersome and expensive. In Yuma, for example, farmers have to prove they have housing for laborers even though many return to Mexico each night to sleep at home, Resnick says.

The H-2B visa program that offers temporary work permits for lower-skilled non-agricultural workers also is inadequate to meet labor demands for busboys, hotel maids, home health-care workers and other jobs that are hard to fill with American workers. The children of elected officials may not want to make beds at the local resort. But there are economic-development opportunities providing housing, goods and services to migrant workers.

The H-1B visa program - for professionals with highly specialized knowledge - also fails to meet the demand for labor. Promising foreign students who graduate from U.S. universities often are unable to stay in this country to work even though U.S. companies want to recruit them. Rather than hurting American workers, hiring foreign talent in this country helps keep jobs here, says Stuart Anderson of the **National Foundation for American Policy**.

Companies that can't recruit American-trained foreigners to work in the United States may opt to hire them at offshore locations. Or the United States may simply lose these U.S.-trained professionals to other countries. Either way, fewer jobs are created in the United States and America's competitiveness slips.

"We need a workforce that keeps the U.S. competitive in the 21st century," Kolbe says. Providing adequate temporary-worker visas at both the high and low end of the pay scale serves national security and the American economy.