

Sustainable Food Requires Sustainable Immigration Reform



I've been a Land Stewardship Project (LSP) member for several years because I believe strongly in the work they do: supporting family farms, taking care of our land, and most importantly, building a healthy, sustainable food system for all. I also believe strongly in the need for immigration reform that results in a path to legalization for people who have immigrated to the United States and an end to raids and detention that violate basic human rights.

Until recently, I regarded these two issues as completely separate from one another. However, I've come to understand that they are in fact inextricably linked, and that to build a sustainable food system tomorrow, we must enact immigration reform today.

There are many reasons why improving the status of immigrants in the U.S. is vital to building a sustainable food and farming system. The industrial agriculture system relies on exploiting workers to keep its costs low, so legalizing and supporting these immigrant workers would diminish the competitive advantage of large factory farms. An incredible amount of the labor that maintains our current food system depends on immigrant workers, many of whom are undocumented. Losing this labor, explained U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack recently, would result in higher food prices and the need to import much of our

food—certainly a move in the opposite direction of a local, sustainable food system.

To achieve a sustainable food and farming system, we need more farmers on the land. Fair immigration reforms would create pathways for immigrant workers, many with extensive agricultural experience, to enter agriculture as farm owners and entrepreneurs. Illegal hiring, immigration raids, and deportation exploit immigrant workers and create fear among those who seek to strengthen their communities. We all rely on the work of reform that will create stronger local economies, healthier land and communities, and justice for these workers and their families.

Those are all practical reasons. But on a broader level, I am a member of LSP because I believe in working together to build a healthy, sustainable community based food system. A sustainable food and farming system contributes to the health of the Earth, health of people and health of the local economy for all members of our community, including immigrants and new Americans from all countries.

Those of us who care about good food and farming have many opportunities to speak up in support of comprehensive immigration reform, and it is important that we do so. We can all participate in the structural and policy change that needs to happen, and we can buy food that is created with fair labor practices. Both kinds of change are necessary to build the food and farming system that we need.

So—what can you do? Speaking up in support of comprehensive immigration reform, learning more about and getting involved in policy initiatives, including the DREAM Act, and becoming a part of organized efforts to win these reforms is something we can all do. As eaters, we can also, as Michael Pollan has said, “vote with your fork three times a day.” Talking with farmers at markets or asking questions of the buyers at your local co-op can help you learn who worked hard to produce your food and allow you to make more informed decisions. It also lets farmers and businesses know this is something you value. Buy food from independent family-owned and-operated farms and farms that use fair labor practices, including processors, businesses and worker-owned cooperatives. Support local businesses and food co-ops that are members of the Domestic Fair Trade Association, an organization that promotes fair trade and labor practices within the United States.

Many farmers who have immigrated here to Minnesota are working hard year round, both growing food and advocating for policy change. You can support their important work by buying from and supporting their enterprises, as well as becoming involved with the policy and organizing efforts that they are leading. Together, we can work for a fair immigration approach that supports the rights of all people. Our communities, economies, food and farms will be healthier because of it.

—Georgia Rubenstein