

The Oregonian

Senators locate one pragmatic path across the border

Credit the Judiciary Committee for arriving

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at a practical, bipartisan solution to illegal immigration

Many Americans want to believe the 11 million illegal immigrants in the United States don't add value to our nation, but only subtract.

In today's newspaper, The Oregonian's Janie Har and Michelle Cole challenge that math.

To be sure, they illuminate both sides of the accounting ledger on illegal immigration, but for once, perhaps, the plus side can't be forgotten or ignored. Har and Cole have put together hard numbers, as well as the best available estimates, on the effects of illegal immigration in Oregon.

Their report also draws on a new analysis by the Oregon Center for Public Policy. This liberal think tank, based in Silverton, has estimated that illegal immigrants pay \$77 million a year in state taxes, including income taxes and excise taxes on gas and cigarettes.

And that's not counting an estimated \$58 million a year that illegal workers in Oregon pay in Social Security taxes, which they never collect, and which their employers must match. Their employers also pay \$29 million to \$34 million a year in state unemployment insurance taxes, another benefit that the workers do not collect.

There's another side of the ledger, too. Although illegal immigrants aren't eligible for the Oregon Health Plan or food stamps, they can get medical help in dire emergencies, police help if they're crime victims or mental help if they suffer a mental breakdown. They can also get the state's help if they're cheated by an employer. (One reason they're extremely vulnerable to such mistreatment, of course, is that they're reluctant to come forward and complain.)

Nationally, an estimated 5 percent of the U.S. workforce is now illegal, concentrated in cleaning, landscaping, construction, meatpacking, dishwashing, hotel-motel work and farm work. In Oregon, it's estimated that an even higher fraction, 7 percent, of our state's entire workforce is illegal.

Undocumented workers in our state earn between \$1.9 billion and \$2.2 billion a year, according to the Center for Public Policy, and they also spend much of it here in Oregon. What illegal workers spend on groceries, gas and other necessities helps keep some towns afloat.

That's not a good reason to keep illegal immigrants flowing into our state, of course. It just shows how intertwined these workers are with our economy. That's why punitive proposals, like the one approved last year by the U.S. House of Representatives, calling for 700 miles of steel fencing, are a fancy form of denial. They sound tough. But they just play into a draconian fantasy, in which all these workers are rounded up, imprisoned and banished. It isn't going to happen.

In contrast, a proposal shepherded through the Senate Judiciary Committee last week by Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., was impressively real-world. It would strengthen our borders substantially, expand enforcement and fine illegal immigrants \$2,000 -- no small sum. An illegal family in Oregon, on average, earns \$24,300 a year. By paying a fine and any back taxes, though, keeping a good record and learning some English and civics, illegal immigrants could potentially participate in a guest-worker program, earn

their way to legal residency and, eventually, even move toward citizenship.

The Specter proposal is that rare thing: a pragmatic, bipartisan solution, taking both pluses and minuses into account. It doesn't pretend illegal residents are legal. It doesn't offer them amnesty.

But it also doesn't pretend we can arrest and deport 11 million people. And it doesn't treat these illegal workers as underlings, felons or scum.

Instead, it treats them as human beings, people trying to earn a living. Any way you add up the numbers, that approach is a plus.

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