

Hoping for enough help

By LINDA GALLAGHER

ATWOOD-While other seasonal businesses across northern Michigan, like the Grand Traverse Resort and many on Mackinac Island, are now scrambling for help for the upcoming summer season thanks to an early cutoff of the number of temporary immigrant workers allowed into the U.S. from Mexico and Jamaica, Richard Friske of Atwood's Friske Farms thinks he'll be ok for help this season.

At least, he hopes so. "As far as I know, all of my Mexican workers will be here," Friske said recently. "In fact, one of them is here now."

Friske, along with most of the other farmers and orchardists in Antrim County, does not participate in the federal H2A program governing migrant workers in the U.S., which guarantees that all of the Mexican national workers

and immigrants from other countries in the programs have proper legal documentation.

And that may be a good thing. With federal quotas met as of January 20, most northern Michigan farmers would be out of luck for immigrant help, like many small tourist businesses, if they relied solely on the H2B or H2A programs, he said. "A lot of businesses this year, like those on Mackinac Island, will end up without any help at all because they couldn't apply for them until 120 days before they're needed, and by that time, the cap had already been met."

Instead, he tries to stay in touch over the winter with last year's workers to ensure they plan on returning. "I take my chances that the documentation shown to me is legal, and try to use the same people from one

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year to the next," he said. "That's about all I can do."

Participating in the programs also present several other issues, like mountains of paperwork that must be filled out, the Atwood farmer said.

The laws and programs regarding immigrant workers change from year to year, he said. "But since I haven't been informed of anything different, I'm assuming everything is status quo for this year."

Asked why he doesn't use local American help for the work

he needs done, which is primarily field and orchard work, Friske said, "I will, if I can find someone who wants to do it. The pay, which is the same for our migrant Mexicans as it is for our American employees, isn't bad, but since it's seasonal, it's hard for someone local with roots in the area to make a living year around that way."

And often, local help is not available when most needed in September and October, he explained. "Young people, which you'll see manning a number of posts around our farm market and gift shop during the summer and on weekends, go back to college

as early as the middle of August, which is right when the busiest part of our season starts, or get involved in high school athletics and other after school activities."

Immigrant Mexican employees are not only hard working and available from spring right through the entire fall season, but willing to jump right in and help where ever needed, he said. "And I have to have reliable help I can count on to be there. So, every year, starting about now, I do my best to make sure their paperwork is correct," he said. "And we just hope that we'll have enough help. That's all we can ever do."

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