

# Mexican workers for a price

by RON HALL / Senior Editor

*Green industry operations that have employed Hispanic laborers for several seasons usually don't have a problem getting them again. But, if you're just getting started with Hispanic workers you may want to talk to a labor contractor like Bob Wingfield, profiled in this, our second of three articles dealing with the green industry's changing labor market. In January we conclude the series with comments from leading landscape companies about their experiences with Hispanic laborers.*

*For a growing number of U.S. landscapers and golf courses, the Mexican labor pipeline goes through the offices of Robert Wingfield in Dallas, Texas.*



Wingfield: Mexican workers want clean, inexpensive housing.

**R**obert Wingfield knew he was doing a dumb thing. He did it anyway. An irrigation contractor, he put all of his undocumented Mexican workers on a single job. Then he got busted by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).

"The economy here in Dallas was lousy, and we were on a big job in a hurry-up mode," he says. "Immigration hit us. They got every guy we had. It knocked us dead in the water for about three weeks. Production was way down even after that. It was November, and our guys went home and stayed until spring."

After that raid in 1986, his ninth for using "illegal" workers, Wingfield got religion.

Within the year he had abandoned his 15-year career as an irrigation contractor, and put out his shingle as a labor contractor. For a placement fee for around \$450 per worker, depending on the number needed, he finds and delivers Mexican workers to labor-starved U.S. industries. Nine years later, he's probably the best-known labor contractor serving the green industry. Landscape companies were among the first to ring his phone. They're still calling him, often when they're desperate for labor. Too often, says Wingfield.

"My job is to locate the workers and to make sure they're suited to the job," he says.

Sitting in a Denny's in Arlington, Texas, finishing off a late breakfast on a blistering hot Thursday morning, Wingfield doesn't look like the sort of guy who would drive out onto a deserted Dallas County road to negotiate with a car-load of "illegal" workers. But, he did, almost 20 years ago. Not any more, though.





Many green industry employers are finding Mexican workers more willing to work 10 hour days than their American-born counterparts.

He says workers he supplies are the ones that became "legal" in 1987 and 1988 following passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). About 3 million aliens, mostly Mexicans, received a "one-time" amnesty then.

They became permanent residents and

could live and work in the U.S. But they're not U.S. citizens. They have to first meet citizenship requirements, which many are now doing.

The IRCA's stated purpose was to stop illegal immigration. It strengthened border patrols and, for the first time, established

penalties for U.S. employers who knowingly hire undocumented workers. The IRCA was amended in 1990 with strong anti-discrimination language.

The IRCA accomplished much: it spawned a new industry in counterfeit worker documents and it dramatically boosted the number of labor contractors—but it didn't stop the flow of illegal immigrants.

That flow became a flood when the Mexican peso's value fell by a third in December 1994. Mexico's working poor became poorer overnight. The lure of employment in the U.S. became even stronger.

Understandably so. A May 30 National Public Radio story on illegal immigrants from Cotija, Michoacan, reported that daily wages were \$50 to \$100 in the U.S. versus \$5 in Cotija. The population of Cotija is 20,000 in summer and almost doubles in winter when men return from seasonal U.S. employment.

The INS estimates that as many as 3 million illegals come to the U.S. temporarily each year. The number of illegals living in the U.S. at any one time approaches 4.2 to 4.7 million. More than half are from Mexico.

Congress, responding to the continuing migration, constructed a new immigration law this year. The law strengthens the borders even more.

But, while Congress debated employer sanctions this year, it did little to actually strengthen them.

With so many illegal immigrants in the U.S. labor market, it would seem that the INS wouldn't have any trouble rounding them up. And fining unscrupulous employers. But it does.

Aurelio Rojas, a reporter with the San Francisco *Chronicle*, revealed earlier this year that from 1989 to 1994, only 12,700 employer cases were reported to INS headquarters. Fewer than half resulted in fines to employers, INS records showed.

The INS is apparently stepping up its workforce enforcement. On June 15, it

## Things you should know

When Robert Wingfield places Mexican workers with a green industry firm, he advises:

1) Treat Mexican workers with the same dignity and respect as other workers. If they think they're being bullied, they'll leave. Also, you're not going to get them cheaper than local labor, but they'll be more productive.

2) It's better if someone at your operation is able to speak Spanish. If you don't have somebody, find somebody. Many Mexican workers don't speak English.

3) Mexican workers usually will need inexpensive housing. They probably won't be willing to spend more than \$125-\$150 a month. They'll share quarters to keep costs low, but housing should be clean and contain a kitchen, table, chairs, sofa, beds, sheets, blankets, etc.

4) They'll want to work more than 40 hours a week. "About the third day that the sun is shining and they don't get to work, they take off," says Wingfield. "They have to go and find someplace where they can get some hours." Their sole purpose in working for you is to make money.

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raided the Palatine Park District outside of Chicago and detained 21 landscape workers, one of 55 inspections in the Chicago area. Several landscaping companies in the Chicago marketplace lost workers, too.

Wingfield says he won't deal in undocumented workers, and that's one reason why it's getting harder to find Mexican laborers.

"It's not like you have them there sitting on a shelf," he says. "And it's not like any Mexican can do landscaping. The best guy to get is from the farm, the guy in blue jeans, a big belt buckle, cowboy hat and cowboy boots. He's from the farm. He's used to working hard."

But that's the type of worker other employers want, too. Many Mexican workers don't make it beyond the booming Dallas metroplex right now. They're being snapped up by construction crews and the building trades there.

"If the guys can make \$5.50 an hour here in Dallas, why would they want to move north for \$6 an hour?" says Wingfield.

"The whole workforce problem scares the hell out of me right now," adds Joe Loyet, a landscaper in St. Louis. "If they (Mexicans) can make more money in construction, they're not going to want to work in the green industry for \$6.35 an hour."

In spite of this, Wingfield says he can continue delivering Mexican laborers to American landscape companies. It's just getting harder.

He says green industry companies don't want to hear this because Mexican labor is not even an option any more.

"They have to hire Mexicans out of self defense, to stay in business," says Wingfield. "How many Americans want to go out there in the hot sun and push a lawn mower for 10 hours a day week after week?" **LM**

## Tips for hiring foreign-born employees

Unsure of the steps to take in hiring foreign-born employees?

Obtain the "Handbook for Employers" put out by the U. S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. Call 1-800-870-3676 and the INS will send it to you. It explains hiring guidelines.

Develop a procedure to examine each applicant's work eligibility by their documents. This is your main responsibility as an employer. You're not expected to be an expert on forged or altered documents.

An applicant can use many different documents to establish employment eligibility. By law, you, as an employer, cannot specify which documents you will accept. You risk being the target of a discrimination action if you do.

If a worker can document both his identity and employment eligibility, and you comply with the Form I-9 requirements, you're covered. The Form I-9, contained within the "Handbook for Employers," verifies that a person is eligible to work in the United States. One must be filled out for every employee.

In 1995 a Employment Verification Pilot (EVP) system for employers in Los Angeles and Santa Ana turned up 3,000 false immigration documents from the 11,400 new hires that were checked. Under the EVP system, after an acknowledged immigrant is hired, the employer submits the new hire's A-number to INS computers, which return an "authorized" or "not authorized."

The INS extended the EVP system to San Diego in July, and by mid-September about 350 employers with 200,000 employees, plus the state of Florida with 95,000 employees, participated in EVP. The EVP system screens only those who acknowledge that they are foreigners.

Penalties for "knowingly" hiring illegal workers and being audited by the INS, can be stiff, from \$250 to \$2,500 per worker. In a related matter, Florida Gov. Lawton Chiles said that private companies knowingly hiring illegal immigrants would be banned from getting state contracts.

Be consistent in your hiring procedures for all employees. Develop a file or folder for each worker with copies of their documents. Have the paperwork available should an INS agent visit your business. □



Landscaper Joe Loyet, St. Louis, keeps all of his Mexican workers' documents in a 3-ring binder.