

Good news down Mexico way

At the invitation of Jeff West, vice president of GTO International L.L.C., I flew to central Mexico this past July. What I learned there encouraged me, and it should encourage you, too. Read about the growing role of Hispanics in the landscape industry on page 24.

But first you should know more about Jeff and his company, GTO.

GTO is the labor contracting company that West founded. GTO is the abbreviation for Guanajuato, the Mexican city where his company maintains an office.

West graduated from Arizona State University with a degree in horticulture and spent the next 11 years as a golf course superintendent in Arizona and California. He returned to his home state of Michigan to build a golf course at the Wyndgate Club. He's now involved in several entrepreneurial ventures, including GTO, and works mostly out of his home.

A necessary thing

West got involved with finding Mexican labor out of necessity. In 1995, the INS took away his Mexican workers as they were building the golf course. The INS said they were working with fake social security cards.

So he researched the H-2B program as a way to provide himself and his employer a pipeline to dependable and "legal" workers from Mexico. He traveled to Mexico, met with workers and talked with government officials. From there, it wasn't too hard to find Mexican workers for other U.S. landscape businesses, too. For a price of course.

I went to central Mexico because I wanted to see where so many of our Green Industry's workers come

from and how we recruit them. I wanted to know why these mostly young men leave their families for 9 to 10 months each year to mow for 10 hours a day, 6 days a week. The answer was too obvious — employment.

Like I mentioned before, most of what I learned should encourage labor-strapped U.S. landscapers.

First, there is a huge pool of healthy, willing young Mexican workers eager to work in the U.S. That means that as long as our government allows us to bring them in through the H-2B program, we can select and keep the best.

Next, Mexican state officials support efforts by U.S. industry to establish training programs in Mexico. In fact, they're willing to help set up these programs. The more dollars that their citizens earn, the better for their local economies.

On a more controversial note, incoming Mexican President Vincinte Fox stated he wants a freer flow of commerce across the U.S./Mexican border, something akin to the United States' relationship with Canada. This isn't going to happen soon even if Mexico's new government begins doing its part to halt illegal immigration.

Jeff West is not counting on uncertain immigration policies to drive his business. Instead, he's banking on U.S. demographics that suggest the need for evermore labor, and the eagerness of Mexican workers to fill that gap.

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There are more young Mexican workers
eager to work in the United States
than we could ever assimilate into the workforce.

