WASHINGTON — States along the U.S.-Mexico border may be driving the debate over immigration laws and how to handle the problem of people entering the country illegally. However, states far from the border crisis face another set of challenges — not enough farmworkers to harvest their crops.

More than 20,000 U.S. farms employ more than 435,000 immigrant workers legally every year, according to 2012 U.S. Department of Agriculture data. Thousands — probably tens of thousands — more are employed illegally. Agricultural powerhouses, such as Florida and California, employ tens of thousands of seasonal immigrant laborers from Spanish-speaking countries every year to pick produce. Yet, farmers in states far from the border face a labor shortage.

“Because we’re not a border state, it’s definitely harder to get people over this far from the border to work,” said Chalmers Carr. He owns the East Coast’s largest peach grower, South Carolina’s Titan Farms. “There’s truly not enough farmworkers now, legal or illegal.”

South Carolina has seen the greatest percentage increase in Hispanic population in the country from 2000 to 2010. The number of Hispanics in the state jumped 150 percent during those years, according to government data. While many immigrants are taking short-term farm work, the labor shortage isn't going away.

**The Crops Cannot Wait**

“It’s not a temporary situation,” said Lynn Tramonte of America’s Voice, a group focusing on immigration reform. Proposals to reform the nation's immigration laws include increasing the number of legal immigrants and workers and creating a path to citizenship for people who came here illegally. “It might be a seasonal job, but we’re going to keep having grapes that need to be picked and cows that need to be milked, and immigrants are coming to do that sort of labor.”

Immigrant workers who slipped illegally across the border years ago are retiring from the workforce. Younger, more able-bodied migrant workers are being kept from the fields because they don't have work papers. Farmers say the crops and the growing season cannot wait.

“We’re losing that aging population, but we’re also not getting anybody replacing them because of the mess we have at the border and no immigration law,” said Manuel Cunha Jr. He is the president of California’s Nisei Farmers League, which represents over 180 types of farms.

The problem is not limited to the South either.

“In northern Ohio, we’re on the front lines, and it’s not because we’re on the northern border,” said Mark Gilson. He owns Gilson Gardens in northeastern Ohio, which relies on seasonal immigrant workers. “It’s because the agricultural jobs are here.”

**"Why Don't I Hire Americans?"**

Those who oppose immigration suggest that U.S. workers should fill those agriculture jobs. That idea is simply out of touch with reality, farmers say.

Carr says he gets criticized for hiring migrant workers. People ask, "Why don’t I hire Americans?” Carr said. “I can clearly tell you Americans aren’t out there willing to do these jobs.”

From 2010 to 2012, Carr said, he advertised for 2,000 workers. Only 432 — less than 25 percent — of the people who applied were U.S. workers. Then 390 of them never showed up or they quit on the first day.

“About 5 percent of the agriculture jobs needed, you’ll get American workers for," Carr said. "You’ve got a choice to import your food or you can import your labor to harvest your food.”

“Americans don’t want to do this work. It’s seasonal; it tends to be low-paying,” agreed Gilson. People who receive unemployment pay because they lost their jobs "don’t want to go off unemployment to do this type of work.”

Those realities may be what’s changing minds in states that have generally opposed allowing in more immigrants. Republican Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina unexpectedly proposed a law to allow more immigration in 2008. However, he backed off after facing criticism from Republicans.

**Inaction In Washington**

Lawmakers left Washington, D.C., for the August congressional break without taking action on immigration reform. They also aren't expected to take up the matter once they return in September and turn their focus to November’s elections.

The delay in dealing with the issue could create chaos for farmers, who are limited by complicated federal programs that let temporary workers in the country.

The programs provide passes for immigrants looking to cross the border for agricultural work, but minimum wage and identity requirements make the programs difficult for farmers to follow. They are so complicated some hire workers illegally or move their farms overseas.

“When we need those workers we have to have them, because Mother Nature doesn’t hold up and wait for us to get workers,” said Cunha. “When it’s time to harvest, it’s time to harvest.”

On top of that, South Carolina’s Carr says the recent flood of children slipping across the U.S. border has clogged the system further. Thousands of unaccompanied children from Central America have crossed the border illegally, leading the federal government to deal with them instead of seasonal workers.

Gilson of Ohio said the situation is complicated, but farmers have a lot of respect for the immigrant workers. “These aren’t just people with their heads down in the field for us," he said. "We respect their hard work, and we share traditional American values with them."

Reflection Ideas – How has immigration shaped our country? What would you like to see to immigration? What is the biggest issue with immigration in your opinion?