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Grape growers and farmers throughout California are facing a range of challenges finding and holding on to laborers as they head into harvest.

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Grape growers and farmers throughout California are facing a range of challenges finding and holding on to laborers as they head into harvest.

State enforcement agencies are cracking down on wage and labor violations, labor groups and activists are targeting farm companies with negative campaigns, and fewer workers are crossing the border from Mexico, grape growers were told Friday at the annual trade show held by Sonoma County Winegrowers.

Unions have been emboldened by recent changes to the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act, said Michael Saqui, attorney with Saqui Law Group, based in Roseville and Salinas.

In some cases, union organizers have taken to social media channels to create boycott campaigns against farm employers before the companies were served with complaint papers.

“The social justice network — Twitter, Facebook, periodicals that go out over the Internet — now are the fastest way to boycott a product that we’ve ever seen, and they’re successfully using it,” Saqui said.

In one case, a tomato grower represented by Saqui did not know it had been hit with a labor relations complaint until the retailer that sold its tomatoes was targeted in a social media campaign, Saqui said.

“We had no idea that they had filed unfair labor practices against us, because we had

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tried to stop farmers' conversion to mechanization in other regions, he said, and they could do so in the vineyards.

“You think we've got a boycottable product in wine? Yeah, we've got a boycottable product,” Saqui said.

Saqui encouraged vineyard managers to train supervisors and provide a handbook that deals with issues like sexual harassment and heat illness, and to talk regularly with field workers to suss out any issues.

“It's going to be over 100 (degrees) this weekend,” Saqui said. “Are you ready? OSHA is. They're already here. They'll wine taste today, but tomorrow they should be ready.”

Meanwhile, growers that rely on immigrant workers are facing a shrinking workforce, said Monte Lake, attorney with CJ Lake based in Washington, D.C. That workforce will get even smaller when E-Verify, the system that allows employers to check the working status of employees, eventually becomes mandatory, he predicted.

“About 70 percent of your applicants are going to be excluded because of E-Verify,” Lake said. “In the past we had a shortage of legal workers. Now we're seeing a shortage of bodies ... the immigrants are not coming anymore because of the army and fences we have at the border.”

In a 2012 survey, 80 percent of raisin and berry growers were unable to find an adequate number of employees, demonstrating the need for immigration reform, Lake said. In the dairy industry, three out of five workers are undocumented, making the industry a target for Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

“They're sitting ducks,” Lake said.

Local grape growers are sensing there will be even fewer agriculture workers

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program, which would create an annual cap on visas and a new "blue card" program that would provide a path for experienced, unauthorized farm workers to obtain a green card, he said.

While the bill has a chance of passage in the Senate, it faces an uncertain future in the House of Representatives, Lake said. He encouraged growers to contact lawmakers and weigh in on the immigration bills before Congress. For every email a lawmaker gets from an agriculture interest, they typically get about 1,000 emails from opponents of immigration reform, he said.

Doug McIlroy, director of winegrowing at Rodney Strong Wine Estates, said he has called his congressman, and plans to follow up and to encourage other growers to do so.

"On a lot of these issues, the people who are opposed seem to be the ones that are saying the most, and what we need is support to do this," McIlroy said. "It's important for the Hispanic community, too. They want this as well."

The real fight over immigration reform will be in the House, said John Aguirre, president of the California Association of Winegrape Growers, which met with California congressional representatives in May.

"Our job is to ignite the grass roots, to get the growers to send emails," Aguirre said.

"We basically better get a program quick or you're not going to have any workers," Lake said. "On a tough issue like this, we really need unity to have a chance."

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