

If Wasden's challenge prevails, Idaho loses

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Idaho Attorney General Lawrence Wasden must have something better to do than trying to derail President Obama's immigration policy.

In joining 20 states suing the president, Wasden makes a legal point: Obama's executive order freeing 5 million undocumented workers from the threat of deportation exceeds his constitutional authority.

But why is that argument so compelling to a legal officer from a landlocked state located about 1,000 miles from the Mexican border? Of the original plaintiffs, only Texas Attorney General and Gov.-elect Greg Abbott hails from a border state. Idaho filed its brief sooner than Arizona — which came on board Thursday.

Why is Obama's policy more vexing to Utah than it is to California?

Why is South Dakota going to court while New Mexico is not?

Sure, Idaho has an estimated 50,000 undocumented immigrants. And according to the Pew Research Center, Idaho is one of seven states where that population expanded between 2009 and 2012.

All the more reason to demand Congress pass immigration reform. Short of that, Obama's policy at least makes a bad situation in the Gem State somewhat better.

Undocumented workers fuel the state's agricultural, construction and hospitality industries. Without them, the so-called Magic Valley Miracle would be a mirage. Dairies that expanded in Idaho would have curtailed their operations or moved them to South Dakota or even Texas.

Two years ago, a team of University of Idaho researchers estimated Idaho's economy would lose \$430 million a year — pulling \$43 million out of state and local tax revenues — if just a quarter of the state's foreign-born workers disappeared.

What does Wasden say to the families who, thanks to Obama's order, sleep a little better at night knowing their fathers or mothers no longer need to live in fear?

The typical undocumented worker has a spouse and children who are legal residents if not citizens of this country. If the breadwinner is deported, not only does his family suffer, the Idaho taxpayer is now expected to care for people who were getting by on their own resources.

What does Wasden say to their employers? Ask around Idaho agribusiness and you just might learn that during the last decade, some have not had one white person apply for a job — even if those jobs pay \$12 to \$14 an hour with benefits, including day care.

If the papers check out, they hire people. They invest in their training. Then they live with the dread that comes from knowing they're just one federal raid away from losing their labor pool — as well as facing fines.

And what does Wasden tell Idaho cops?

They know that as long as an undocumented worker faces the threat of deportation, he's going to remain underground.

If he's cheated out of money, he doesn't report it.

When he's confronted with domestic violence, he has no choice but to keep quiet.

If he's hurt in a traffic accident through no fault of his own, he slips away.

Going to the authorities brings scrutiny.

People who can't go to the police become even more vulnerable to abuse. The vicious cycle feeds on itself.

To follow Wasden's logic, Obama did the right thing in the wrong way. But if the attorney general prevails, he potentially damages Idaho's economy and adds to human misery.

How is any of that in Idaho's best interest? — M.T.