

Hired Farm Workers: Critical To U.S. Agricultural Production

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The USDA Economic Research Service has issued a new report indicating that more than 1 million hired farm workers are employed in U. S. agriculture. While productivity gains have gradually reduced the total agricultural labor force, hired farm workers continue to play an important role in the agricultural industry, particularly in labor intensive areas such as fruits and vegetables.

The report emphasizes that the hired farm worker labor market is unique because it includes a relatively disadvantaged and sometimes mobile workforce, a large proportion of whom lack authorization to work in the United States. Interests and concerns are especially significant for hired farm labor with expanding immigrant populations in more rural counties and growing concerns over U. S. immigration policies that include hired farm workers.

This report shows:

In 2006 an average 1.091 million hired farm workers made up a third of the estimated 3 million people employed in agriculture. The other 2.05 million included self employed farmers and their unpaid family members.

Expanding nonfarm economic opportunities for farmers and their family members have increased farmers' reliance on hired farm labor.

Although many Hispanic workers have settled in rural areas, the geographic distribution of farm workers has not changed significantly in the past 10 years. California, Florida, Texas, Washington, Oregon and North Carolina account for half of all hired and contracted farm workers.

Hired farm workers are disadvantaged relative to most other U. S. wage and salary workers. On average, hired farm workers are younger, less educated, more likely to be foreign-born, less likely to speak English, and less likely to be U. S. citizens or to have a legally authorized work permit.

The National Agricultural Workers Survey shows that half of all hired crop farm workers lack legal authorization to work in the United States.

The report shows that farm worker unemployment rates are double those of all wage and salary workers but vary considerably by indi-

viduals. Crop workers are more frequently unemployed than livestock workers.

Hired farm workers earn less than other workers. Poverty among farm workers is more than double all wage and salary employees.

The hired farm workers who migrate from one location to another earn less than settled farm workers. They also have poorer health and their children may have more problems attending school.

Housing conditions for farm workers have historically been substandard because of crowding, poor sanitation, proximity to pesticides and lax enforcement of housing regulations.

Farm worker health remains a considerable occupational concern because of exposure to pesticides, risk of heat exhaustion, high health care costs and language barriers.

Hired farm workers use Food Stamps, Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition program, medicaid and free school lunches at higher rates than other wage and salary employees.

This study of hired farm workers shows the need for new policies that protect and support farm workers welfare and assure agricultural producers of an adequate supply of dependable and legal workers. Such policies should include a guest worker program that would permit foreign workers to work during the crucial harvest periods when domestic workers are not available and return to their home countries during times when growing and harvest operations would not require their help.

Immigration policies should also be reviewed to determine how those most skilled workers contributing to our agricultural production might eventually become citizens if they want to. To identify the legal status of farm workers, a system of individual identification cards may be needed.

To accomplish the changes needed will require a bipartisan effort from members of Congress and state governments. To eventually qualify for citizenship, individuals should have needed employable skills, be able to speak English, obey federal, state and local laws, and pay federal income, social security, state and local taxes that all other citizens are required to pay.

For the long term interests of American agriculture, immigration policy reform is needed to protect hired farm workers and assure adequate labor for labor intensive agricultural production. Δ

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