

## **Myth vs. Reality: The Truth About Agriculture's Workforce Needs & Immigration Reform**

*Myth 1: Farmers just want cheap labor. If they just paid their workers more, they'd be able to hire Americans to do these jobs.*

Reality: According to a USDA-NASS farm labor survey conducted in 2013, the national average field and livestock workers wage was \$11.27 an hour. Experience from the H-2A visa program, where farmers are required to recruit American workers before turning to guest workers, demonstrates year-after-year that very few Americans apply for, accept and perform these jobs.

Work in agriculture requires skill and intense physical effort. Additionally, it is often seasonal and migrant in nature. Most Americans do not want to pursue this type of work. Labor-intensive agriculture must have workers and will take place where there are workers. So long as the workforce willing to do this work exists in other countries, we will either eat imported food or food produced by those same workers here. Without workers from other countries, we lose the jobs and economic benefits that domestic production supports in rural agricultural communities.

*Myth 2: The solution to agriculture's labor shortage is to use mechanization and technology to replace the need for workers.*

Reality: For many farmers in labor intensive sectors, the technology to mechanize a substantial part of their farm work does not yet exist. There reasons for this this is as varied as the crops they grow. For some, machines may damage produce making it unsaleable to consumers, leading to food waste. Others need people, not machines, to judge which fruit on the trees are ready to pick and which need to be left to ripen. And ensuring good animal welfare means that dairy and other livestock producers will always need humans to tend to the animals.

*Myth 3: When you talk about dealing with the current workforce that is undocumented, you're really talking about is amnesty, that people will be rewarded for breaking the law.*

Reality: The Oxford dictionary defines amnesty as "a general overlooking or pardon of past offenses"—in effect, giving those who have broken the law something for nothing. The AWC believes that any action to deal with the current workforce should be an earned pathway to legalization, with stringent requirements that need to be met. These might include requiring agricultural workers to prove that they worked in the agricultural sector for some time and requiring them to commit to working in agriculture for a period going forward. Before they receive legal status they should also have to prove that they are paying taxes and that they are not in trouble with the law for non-immigration related offenses. They will also need to pay a fine.

*Myth 4: If American farmers can't afford to grow these crops, it doesn't matter to me. Our country can just get our food from more competitive farmers in foreign countries.*

Reality: The American economy has ensured major challenges in job creation over the past five years. The activities that occur on domestic farms support not only farmworkers, but also an entire supply chain of transportation providers, input suppliers, processors and consumer retail functions. Many of those jobs would be severely compromised or permanently lost if we choose to unnecessarily outsource our agricultural productivity.

Most Americans realize that fully outsourcing some sectors of our economy would cause unacceptable threats to our national security. If a Chinese company could build jet fighters or battle tanks for less money than an American one, should we still outsource that production? If a country can't feed itself, it can't defend itself.

*Myth 5: There are just some minor tweaks that can be made to the existing ag worker visa program that can fix the problem; it could even be tacked on as an amendment or rider to another bill.*

Reality: The current H-2A program is broken, which is why the AWC has advocated a new guestworker program as part of immigration reform. The current program supplies less than four percent of hired, on-farm workers and is limited to seasonal work, which excludes farmers with year round needs, such as dairy.

*Myth 6: We really just need tighter border security instead of immigration reform.*

Reality: The best way to help secure the border is to create legal avenues for sufficient numbers of agricultural workers to enter and leave the country each year and to make sure that current undocumented workers come out of the shadows. Our government does not need to spend resources locking up farm workers when it should be focusing on keeping bad actors out of the country. As long as there is demand in the United States for farm workers, hard-working people will continue seeking these opportunities to make a better life for themselves and their families back home.

*Myth 7: If farm workers are legalized, they will leave agriculture.*

Reality: A look at historical experience suggests a more nuanced result. It is true that many farm workers who were legalized pursuant to the Reagan-era Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) left agriculture within a few years. Because reforms to legal visa programs never materialized, these departing workers were mostly replaced by new arrivals who lacked proper

work authorization. On the other hand, significant numbers of farm workers have remained in agriculture, and many acquired skills and experience which allowed them to advance to supervisory, equipment operation, and other skilled roles. Some obtained legal permanent residency and chose to reside outside the U.S. but commuted to daily employment opportunities in southern Arizona, California, and even Texas. However, these workers are aging out of the farm workforce.

The lessons are two-fold. First, for Congress to solve agriculture's workforce dilemma wisely, there should be special incentives for current, experienced farm workers to remain working in the agricultural sector for a period of years. Such incentives would stabilize the workforce responsible for American food production and food security, and would be a tradeoff for these workers committing to remain in the sector. Secondly, Congress must establish a better agricultural visa program to ensure access to legally authorized workers in the future.

Myth 8: The agricultural labor crisis can be solved without legalization.

Reality: An estimated 1.1 to 1.5 million of the roughly 2 million farm workers hired each year in the U.S. lack proper immigration status. It is logistically unrealistic to think that these workers could be removed and replaced. Moreover, many have developed special skills over years of work, skills that are vital and virtually irreplaceable. Many have families legally present. Finally, Demographic changes and improving economic conditions in places like Mexico, from which most farm workers have historically arrived, suggest that there may not be enough willing and available talent to replace that now laboring to sustain American agriculture.