



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.

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. The reasons for this are as varied as the crops they grow. For some, machines may damage produce to such an extent as to make it unsaleable to consumers, leading to food waste. Others need people, not machines, to judge which fruit on the tree are ready to pick and which need to be left on to ripen. Most pruning and training of fruit and nut trees and grape vines requires a skilled eye and careful judgment. And ensuring good animal welfare means that dairy and other livestock producers will always need workers to tend to their animals. Mechanization, automation, and other labor-saving strategies are one part of the solution, but are long-term and expensive strategies that won't eliminate labor needs.

Myth 3: When you talk about dealing with the current workforce that is undocumented, you're really talking about 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 the current workforce must earn any adjustment of status. This "earned pathway" must involve stringent penalties and future work requirements. Before they receive legal status they should pay a fine, prove that they are paying taxes and remain free of non-immigration related offenses.

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: 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.

In addition, 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.

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: All participants in the H2A program recognize that it is fundamentally broken and that is why the AWC and the vast majority of policymakers from all political viewpoints agree that a new guestworker program must be created. Due to its flaws, the current H-2A 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. It is naive to think that a program that is so universally-flawed could be "tweaked" and then expanded more than 20 times beyond its current size to handle the current needs of American agriculture.

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: 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. Attempting to remove or replace these workers will destroy the existing supply of workers and create major negative economic consequences for consumers as well as all the intermediate businesses that support the agriculture supply chain from farm to table.

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 those who are currently laboring to sustain American agriculture.