

US farmers, desperate for help, increasingly turn to Mexico

In Michigan, a top fruit producer, the number of growers using an expensive and cumbersome visa process to bring farmhands from Mexico has jumped from four to 50 in the past four years. Congress is considering a bill that would make it easier to employ guest workers.

By **Christa Case Bryant**, Staff writer | JUNE 22, 2018

Dowagiac, Mich.

The apple trees were heavy with fruit, and the rows and rows of tomatoes, squash, and hot peppers were ripe for picking. But in the end, Gary and Patty Bartley, prizewinning farmers in western Michigan, had to leave \$200,000 to \$300,000 worth of their crops to rot in their fields last year.

They couldn't find enough people to pick everything.

That was not for lack of trying. They had urged their domestic migrant workers to return, but only 12 did – about a third of the crew size they needed. The Bartleys placed ads in papers out of state and advertised all season with the Michigan state workforce development agency. Not a single person applied.

So this year they did something their lawyer had told them they should never do: enroll in an expensive and cumbersome visa program known as H-2A to bring up workers from Mexico.

Since the Michigan Farm Bureau set up a for-profit affiliate four years ago to provide guidance navigating the red tape, the number of Michigan growers using the program has jumped from four to 50. And the Bartleys' lawyer, seeing the decline in migrant workers, changed her mind and became the lawyer for the affiliate, Great Lakes Agricultural Labor Services.

The challenge is that H-2As make a significant dent in farmers' profits. The program costs \$1,600 to \$1,800 per worker in fees, plus the grower must provide free housing, linens, equipped kitchens, and regular transportation to buy groceries and other supplies.

"Nobody goes into H-2A because it's fun or it's cheap or it's just a good time," says Bob Boehm, program manager for Great Lakes Ag. "We're trying to create an option where they can keep farming."



Gary and Patty Bartley, western Michigan farmers for 38 years, oversee 120 acres of orchards that produce about 4.8 million pounds of apples a year. Last year, a shortage of pickers forced them to leave some crops rotting in the field. (Christa Case Bryant/The Christian Science Monitor)

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Two workers from Mexico help plant stakes in western Michigan fields farmed by Gary and Patty Bartley. They brought the workers to their farm through the expensive H-2A visa program, which they're using for the first time this year. CHRISTA CASE BRYANT/THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

The strong economy that has caused labor shortages in many industries has sharpened an already chronic problem in agriculture that dates back to 9/11, when heightened security concerns resulted in tighter border control. The domestic migrant workforce has been thinning out as parents approach retirement age, and their children pursue more lucrative work opportunities. And since many migrant laborers came to the United States illegally, they're worried about crossing state lines and getting caught, especially since some states are more aggressive about cracking down on undocumented workers.

Another challenge: a tax-filing change in 1996, which critics of illegal immigration say has allowed undocumented immigrants to receive thousands more in tax credits than they pay in taxes each year – at a cost of \$1.5 billion annually. With more benefits, immigrants may be less likely to work.

Farmers are desperate for the labor situation to be addressed. The H-2A program may be an increasingly popular stop-gap measure, but it's not a long-term solution.

Growers are keeping a close eye on Congress as the GOP leadership puts forward immigration reform bills this week.

"I think the opportunity is there, we just need them to rise to the occasion," says John Kran, national legislative counsel for the Michigan Farm Bureau.

How Congress could help

Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R) of Virginia, former chair of the Agriculture Committee and the current chairman of the Judiciary Committee overseeing immigration issues, put forward a bill this week that included an H-2C visa program that would streamline the process for getting guest workers and eventually replace the H-2A program.

Representative Goodlatte's bill, which was wide-ranging and more conservative than a "compromise" bill still under consideration, lost on a 193-231 vote in the House on Thursday. But Paul Schlegel, managing director of public policy and economics at the American Farm Bureau Federation in Washington, says his understanding is that the GOP leadership will put forward a separate bill later this summer that will deal only with agriculture.

That would be welcome news for farmers, whose need for guest workers has repeatedly gotten lumped in with stickier

immigration issues.

The CHRISTIAN SCIENCE
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“Everybody wanted to attach the farm labor problem to the immigration bill, because we’re the attractive piece. Everybody loves farmers,” says Fred Leitz, a Michigan farmer and former president of the National Council of Agricultural Employers. “We’ve been held hostage to comprehensive immigration reform a couple times.... I’ve seen that movie, I know how it ends.”

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Goodlatte’s H-2C proposal, which could be revived in future legislation, would have capped the number of visas for migrant workers at 450,000, though current H-2A workers and domestic migrant workers who were improperly documented would not count against that cap. The H-2A program has been growing rapidly, especially in Michigan, Florida, New York, and Washington state, says Mr. Kran. Last year, the US issued 200,000 H-2A visas, and the increasing demand makes farmers apprehensive about setting an inflexible cap.

Smiling, and ready early

Lupe Blanco, the daughter of migrant workers, first came to the Bartleys’ farm to visit her sister, who was working as the supervisor. With the exception of that first winter, Mrs. Blanco has never left.

Now she and her husband, who arrived as a teenager with nothing but a garbage bag, are the supervisors.

She says the H-2A workers who have arrived so far have been great. She tells them to be ready at 8 a.m., and they’re there at 7:45 a.m. with a smile on their faces.

“They know how to do pretty much everything,” she says, talking in the on-site laundromat near the 14-foot trailers where the workers live. “Ten to 15 minutes to teach them and boom! They’re like a speedy bullet.”

Mr. Bartley, a mechanical engineer, helped to develop farming applications for technology like facial recognition, so each worker’s hours and productivity levels are precisely measured. The teams with the greatest productivity are given bonuses, which can raise the standard \$13.06 per hour pay to as much as \$20 per hour.

They range in age from 19 to 30, and some work on family farms back home during the winter season.

The Bartleys, who had planned to start scaling back their operation five years ago, are hoping that this new source of labor will help them regain the equity they have lost in recent years so that they can finally retire.

“We don’t want to get rich,” says Bartley. “We just want to make a living and pay our bills.”