

Farmers get help with workers' visas

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By [Emily Bazar](#)

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Two years ago, Bruce Talbott could barely scrape together enough workers to harvest the peaches, apples, pears and grapes on his 400-acre farm in Palisade, Colo.

Competition for unskilled labor was fierce, he says, and the state was cracking down on the illegal immigrants who often filled those jobs.

One option was the federal visa program for seasonal farm workers, but Talbott, 49, had avoided it because of its reputation for being bureaucratic and expensive. He gave in, he says, because he couldn't risk letting fruit rot.

"We would lose our income for the year," he says.

Ads for vacant \$9.42-an-hour jobs had no takers this year, Talbott's second season using the H-2A visa program. About 40 of his farm hands are here legally from Mexico for the season.

He got the workers, in part, by paying a company about \$600 per worker to handle applications. Next year, he can turn to the state for help.

Farmers associations, a farm workers union and the Colorado government have launched programs to help farmers get visas for workers. They say they acted because Congress failed to pass immigration legislation last year.

"Inaction is no longer an option," says Landon Gates of the Colorado Farm Bureau. "We have producers across the state who ... started making cuts in the amount of acres they produce."

He and others blame a shrinking labor pool on Congress, stepped-up enforcement of immigration law and tough state and local laws targeting illegal immigrants.

"We are trying to work with the program we have," says Jason Resnick of Western Growers, which represents farmers in Arizona and California. The group has a service to apply for visas on behalf of members.

Unlike other visa programs, there's no cap on the number of temporary agricultural visas each year. Last year, the State Department issued 50,791 of the H-2A visas.

That's a fraction of the need. In California's San Joaquin Valley, the peak summer harvest requires 180,000 workers, says Manuel Cunha Jr., president of the Nisei Farmers League,

which represents growers in California, Oregon and Utah. Danny Santos, senior policy adviser to Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski, says his state needs 120,000.

The bulk of hired help on farms — Resnick estimates at least 70% — is in the U.S. illegally using fake documents to get work, he says.

Many farmers have avoided the H-2A program because they must apply weeks in advance and advertise locally to prove the positions can't be filled by U.S. workers. If federal and state agencies then approve an application, a farmer is required to provide the workers with transportation to the U.S. and housing.

Last month, Colorado Gov. Bill Ritter signed a bill to create a program that will guide farmers through the application hoops, shortening processing time. The state will work with the Mexican government and a Mexican labor firm to recruit workers.

The United Farm Workers union (UFW) hopes to ease the visa process by matching workers with farmers.

Foreign workers often are charged thousands of dollars by labor contractors in their home countries, which the union would eliminate, says Erik Nicholson of the union's guest worker program. Farmers would have to negotiate wages and conditions with the union.

The UFW has agreements with Mexico and Thailand to streamline immigrants' paperwork. The first workers from Thailand will land in a few weeks, headed for vegetable farms on the East Coast.

In the Mexican state of Michoacán, officials have promised the union expedited passport services, background checks and training.

"We don't want any more people from Michoacán dying trying to cross into the United States," says Marco Antonio Zaragoza Sierra of the state's department of immigrants.

Last month, the Nisei Farmers League met with Central American officials, including the president of Honduras, to set up a job training program.. This fall, the group plans to bring 300 Central Americans to the U.S. for training. They would then go home to train thousands of others, who would go to the West Coast with H-2A visas starting in 2010, he says.

Roy Beck of NumbersUSA, a group that advocates reduced immigration, calls the plans "encouraging."

Some farmers "have resolutely refused to use legal means in recruiting workers," he says. "The fact that they're actually ... pursuing legal means, that's a good sign."