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Hiring Locally for Farm Work Is No Cure-All

By **KIRK JOHNSON**

OLATHE, Colo. — How can there be a labor shortage when nearly one out of every 11 people in the nation are unemployed?

That's the question John Harold asked himself last winter when he was trying to figure out how much help he would need to harvest the corn and onions on his 1,000-acre farm here in western Colorado.

The simple-sounding plan that resulted — hire more local people and fewer foreign workers — left Mr. Harold and others who took a similar path adrift in a predicament worthy of Kafka.

The more they tried to do something concrete to address [immigration](#) and joblessness, the worse off they found themselves.

“It's absolutely true that people who have played by the rules are having the toughest time of all,” said Senator Michael Bennet, a Democrat from Colorado.

Mr. Harold, a 71-year-old Vietnam War veteran who drifted here in the late '60s, has participated for about a decade in a [federal program](#) called H-2A that allows seasonal foreign workers into the country to make up the gap where willing and able American workers are few in number. He typically has brought in about 90 people from Mexico each year from July through October.

This year, though, with tough times lingering and a big jump in the minimum wage under the program, to nearly \$10.50 hour, Mr. Harold brought in only two-thirds of his usual contingent. The other positions, he figured, would be snapped up by jobless local residents wanting some extra summer cash.

“It didn't take me six hours to realize I'd made a heck of a mistake,” Mr. Harold said, standing in his onion field on a recent afternoon as a crew of workers from Mexico cut the tops off yellow onions and bagged them.

Six hours was enough, between the 6 a.m. start time and noon lunch break, for the first wave of local workers to quit. Some simply never came back and gave no reason. Twenty-five of them

said specifically, according to farm records, that the work was too hard. On the Harold farm, pickers walk the rows alongside a huge harvest vehicle called a mule train, plucking ears of corn and handing them up to workers on the mule who box them and lift the crates, each weighing 45 to 50 pounds.

“It is not an easy job,” said Kerry Mattics, 49, another H-2A farmer here in Olathe, who brought in only a third of his usual Mexican crew of 12 workers for his 50-acre fruit and vegetable farm, then struggled to make it through the season. “It’s outside, so if it’s wet, you’re wet, and if it’s hot you’re hot,” he said.

Still, Mr. Mattics said, he can’t help feeling that people have gotten soft.

“They wanted that \$10.50 an hour without doing very much,” he said. “I know people with college degrees, working for the school system and only making 11 bucks.”

A mismatch between employers’ requirements and the skills and needs of the jobless — repeated across industries — has been a constant theme of this recessionary era. But here on the farm, mismatch can mean high anxiety.

The H-2A program, in particular, in trying to avoid displacing American citizens from jobs, strongly encourages farmers to hire locally if they can, with a requirement that they advertise in at least three states. That forces participants to take huge risks in guessing where a moving target might land — how many locals, how many foreigners — often with an entire season’s revenue at stake. Survival, not civic virtue, drives the equation, they say.

“Farmers have to bear almost all the labor market risk because they must prove no one really was available, qualified or willing to work,” said Dawn D. Thilmany, a professor of agricultural economics at Colorado State University. “But the only way to offer proof is to literally have a field left unharvested.”

Mr. Harold’s experience is a repeated refrain where farm labor is seasonal and population sparse. And even many immigration hard-liners have come to agree that the dearth of Americans willing to work the fields requires some sort of rethinking, at least, of the H-2A program. Indeed, Representative Lamar Smith of Texas, a conservative Republican, is [pushing a bill](#) that would greatly expand the number of foreign guest workers admitted to the country each year.

In Colorado, the unemployment rate in many rural counties is also significantly lower than in the cities — two neighboring counties here, for example, had 5.5 percent and 6 percent

unemployment rates in August, according to state figures, compared with 9.1 percent for the nation as a whole. The big increase in the wage rate for H-2A workers, meanwhile, up nearly \$2.50 an hour — calculated by averaging what farmers had to pay last year — also suggests that labor demand was already rising.

Mr. Harold usually hires about 50 local workers for the season — regulars who have worked summers for years — and most returned this year, he said. Finding new employees was where he ran into trouble. He was able to recover after the season started, he said, by rushing in another group of H-2A workers from Mexico.

But the broader story of labor in agriculture, economists and historians said, is that through good times and bad and across socioeconomic lines, people who find better lives off the farm rarely return. Mr. Harold and other H-2A farmers said that most of the local residents who tried field work this summer, for example, were Hispanic, many of whom, they said, had probably immigrated in years past for agricultural work before taking better-paid jobs in construction or landscaping.

Other farmers left in the lurch by local workers conceded that what they had to offer was a tough sell — full-time but temporary work. About 56,000 foreign workers came into the country with H-2A visas last year, according to the [most recent federal figures](#), down from 60,000 in 2009.

Heath Terrell is one of the few new local residents who stuck it out. Mr. Terrell, a former hay hauler, was hired to drive a corn truck. That job kept him out of the fields, and out of the sun. Now, as the season has shifted from corn to onions, Mr. Terrell, 42, said he might just stay on with Mr. Harold through the winter, or at least onion season.