

The shortage of farm workers and your grocery bill

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Even as they plant this spring, many American farmers will face an ongoing problem at harvest time—having enough workers to pick their crops.

And a remedy to the shortage is unlikely anytime soon—and not even [immigration reform, currently stalled in Congress](#), would do the trick, said one analyst.

"There's a perception with farmers and others that immigration reform will help legally bring in more farm workers," said J. Edward Taylor, a professor of agriculture at the University of [California](#), Davis, and an expert on immigration and farm labor issues.

"But it really won't solve the shortage in the long run, if they do pass a reform bill," he said.

Taylor, who co-wrote a paper this month on farm labor challenges, noted that the main provider of low-wage agricultural workers in the U.S., at nearly 70 percent, has been [Mexico](#).

But Mexico is drying up as a source. That's because rural Mexicans are getting a better education, courtesy of more government spending, and rejecting farm work, even in their own country.

"The nonfarm economy in Mexico is growing and it's creating new jobs that require engineering and managerial skills and giving better wages," said Taylor. "That's where young people are going."

Taylor also said this switch in career goals is adding to the worker shortage as older farm laborers in the [U.S.](#) are ready to stop working and aren't going to be replaced. And any replacements that might be on their way have been stopped by [tougher border controls and increased deportations](#).

However, it's not only Mexico's younger generation that's rejecting the harder farm work, said Charles Trauger, territory manager at market data firm GlobalView.

"Americans themselves don't seem willing to take the harder farming jobs," said Trauger, who has a farm in Nebraska.

"Nobody's taking them. People want to live in the city instead of the farm," he said. "Hispanics who usually do that work are going to higher paying jobs in packing plants and other industrial areas."

Better wages offered



To entice more workers, farmers have increased wages along with paying for meals and giving bonuses for those workers who stay a whole season. Traditionally on the lower pay scale, real average hourly earnings of nonsupervisory farm laborers has been between \$10.50 and \$10.80 since 2007 and stood at \$10.80 in 2012, [according to the U.S Department of Agriculture](#).

But the actual wages can vary from farm to farm, and there are no benefits or guarantee of work, as weather conditions, [such as California's devastating drought](#), can leave fields fallow and no crop to harvest. [An estimated that 800,000 acres of the Golden State's farm land](#) will be idle this year, creating some \$2.7 billion in crop losses.

Any increase in worker pay can be a financial burden on farmers, said John Kempf, CEO of [Advancing ECO-Agriculture](#), a crop nutrition consulting company.

"As farm income has increased, so have prices for fertilizer and machinery necessary for farming," said Kempf, who has his own farm in Ohio. "That really goes against the idea that farmers, and especially smaller ones, are making enough money. They're keeping very little of what they make."

Experts say consumers may feel the pinch of higher prices from increased labor costs and a lack of harvested crops, but they will keep buying what they need.

Whatever lure there is from better pay may not be enough to bring in more farm workers, said Tim Richards, professor of agribusiness at Arizona State University.

"It's back-breaking work for low pay," he said. "When a lot of agriculture jobs were eliminated during the last recession, a lot of people moved on to construction and other jobs that paid more and they're not coming back."

Taylor said the worker shortage might be eased if farmers used their workers more efficiently and cooperated in how they use their labor. That could translate into more job security by having workers contracted on several farms during harvest season instead of farms individually hiring workers on their own, experts say.

To help offset the labor shortage, many farms, especially larger ones, have turned to technology. That includes using special picking machines and other robotics to harvest crops like delicate fruits and vegetables.

"New technology can help improve worker productivity and cut down costs on the labor intensive crops," said Taylor. But he added that high technology might not be useful for every crop, like labor intensive berries.

'Farmers need to adjust'

Over the last century, an [estimated 3 million migrant and seasonal farm workers were in the U.S.](#) at any one time. But that has declined to around 1 million now, according to the latest USDA numbers.

Farmers are said to have up to a 30 percent shortage in farm workers. Of those here, 72 percent are foreign born, including 68 percent born in Mexico.

As the flow of workers crossing the border slows, and with immigration reform not likely to pass anytime soon or even solve the problem, American farmers have to adjust to a new way of doing business, experts say.

"Farmers may need to move to growing less labor-intensive crops or go even more high tech," said Richards, who believes some sort of immigration reform would have a positive effect on the labor shortage. "But something needs to be done. We can lose a lot of crops that simply don't get picked."

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