

Shutdown Hit Visas for Agriculture Workers

By Miriam Jordan
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The government shutdown froze visa processing for thousands of temporary agriculture workers, raising concerns about a labor shortage just as the harvest kicks off for the multibillion-dollar citrus and vegetable industries.

Growers worry that without enough pickers, produce could be left rotting in the fields. Groups representing growers in Florida, California and Arizona are working furiously with members of Congress to urge the government to expedite processing for H-2A seasonal agriculture visas.

"We need to fast-track the applications because of the perishable nature of the commodities," said Tom Nassif, president of Western Growers, a group that represents the southwest.

Growers had to begin paperwork in late September or early October to meet the application timetable for the workers they will need in November.

But during the 16-day shutdown, which ended Oct. 17, no applications were accepted or processed by the Labor Department, one of the agencies involved in the visa program. A spokesman said the department has "open applications" representing 10,600 workers.

Guest workers account for one-third to one-half of pickers who harvest leafy greens in California's Imperial Valley and in Arizona. That industry, with annual revenue of \$3 billion, supplies 90% of the country's greens during the winter, according to Western Growers.

In Florida, more than half of the state's 12,000 citrus workers have temporary visas, according to the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association.

The state's \$1.2 billion citrus industry is already struggling with disease that causes fruit to drop prematurely from trees.

"Now there is a threat of loss due to the inability of workers to get here in a timely manner, which is distressing growers," said Mike Carlton, the Florida group's labor-relations director.

The group estimates 8,000 Florida applications for H-2A visas are stuck in the pipeline.

Paul Meador, a fourth-generation citrus and vegetable grower who farms thousands of acres in

southwest Florida, said his 400 temporary workers normally arrive in early November. With applications in limbo, he said, "I am very concerned because we have little leeway."

More than a dozen lawmakers have sent letters to the departments of State, Labor and Homeland Security urging action.

An Oct. 17 letter signed by Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D., Calif.), Sen. Orrin Hatch (R., Utah) and six other senators warned that crops could "literally wither in the field...resulting in substantial economic losses, reduction of our domestic food supply and higher prices to consumers."

Congressmen Sam Farr (D., Calif.), Thomas Rooney (R., Fla.) and eight others called in an Oct. 18 letter for extra government workers and other measures to ensure "priority handling" of the visa backlog.

The Labor Department said it began Friday to implement an "enhanced customer-service process" in conjunction with the Department of Homeland Security, which approves visas. For example, it is issuing a required "labor certification" electronically, rather than only by post. Employers then can move faster to the next step, which is handled by DHS.

A labor shortage could affect Florida's standing in the global orange-juice market, where it competes with citrus-growing countries such as Brazil. Mechanization isn't a viable option because Florida growers have been planting new trees, which are more fragile, to replace those crippled by disease.

The recent visa backlog adds to the difficulties U.S. farmers have in finding employees. Amid a shortage of legal workers, farmers have become vocal proponents of an immigration overhaul to adjust the status of undocumented farm workers already in the country.

More than half of all field workers are undocumented, according to the Labor Department, and many farmer groups estimate the share to be higher than 70%. Most growers shun the H-2A program, which involves multiple steps and federal agencies, viewing it as expensive and bureaucratic.

To complete the visa process, farmers must first try to find local workers and then apply in advance for foreign workers during specific periods, often before knowing if weather and other conditions will affect the timing of the harvest.

More growers use the program in states such as Arizona and Georgia, which require employers to use an electronic system, E-Verify, to confirm new hires are authorized to work in the U.S.

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