

Rural Migration News

Blog 190

NOVEMBER 2020

Covid and Farm Labor in 2020

What were the impacts of Covid in 2020 on agriculture and farm labor? Three effects stand out: no widespread reports of labor shortages, more H-2A jobs certified, and more interest in labor-saving mechanization.

No Labor Shortages

First, the demand for farm workers was largely unchanged in 2020, but there were few reports of farm labor shortages. Shipments of selected fresh fruits were down two percent

in 2020 compared with 2019 and up four percent for selected vegetables (these data include imports, which are minimal for most fruits and vegetables shipped during the summer months).

Significantly fewer apples, cantaloupes, and peaches were shipped during the first 10 months of 2020 compared to 2019, but more strawberries and watermelons were shipped in 2020 than in 2019. Among fresh vegetables, shipments of sweet corn were down in 2020

while shipments of round tomatoes were up.

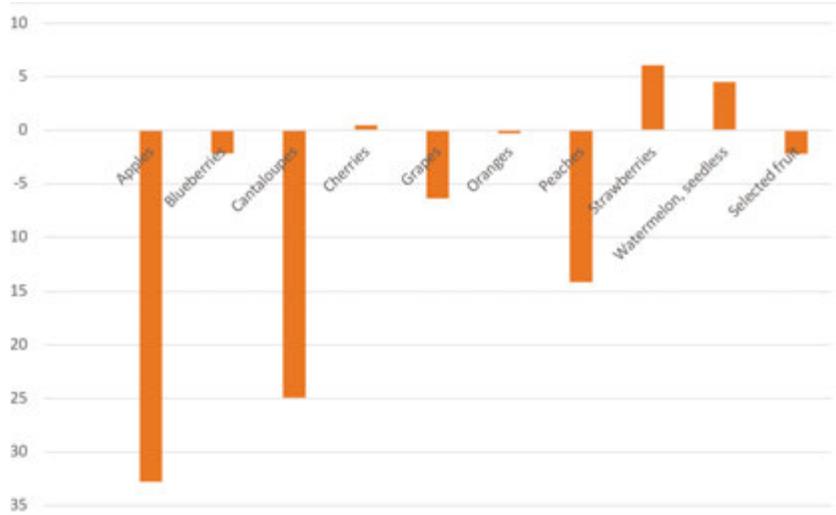
There were few complaints of labor shortages in 2020. Instead, some workers reported fewer hours of work in summer 2020 than they had in summer 2019. Many worker advocates emphasized that the half of all farm workers who are unauthorized had limited access to safety net programs.

Average agricultural employment was down 14 percent in 2020 compared to 2019, but it is not clear how much of this decline was due to employers not reporting employment data due to offices closed by Covid. Employment numbers are often revised upward as more employers report to government agencies.

Some California farm workers are employed by merchant wholesalers who supply grocers (NAICS 41244), a sector where employment was down three percent in 2020 compared to 2019. Many farm commodities are purchased by food manufacturers who process fruits and vegetables and account for 17 percent of average California food manufacturing employment, processors of dairy products who account for 11 percent of average California food manufacturing employment, animal slaughtering firms that account for 14 percent of food manufacturing employment, bakery products that account for 27 percent of food manufacturing employment, and firms that do other food manufacturing and account for 22 percent of food manufacturing employment. Overall, average food manufacturing employment in California was down five percent in 2020 compared to 2019.

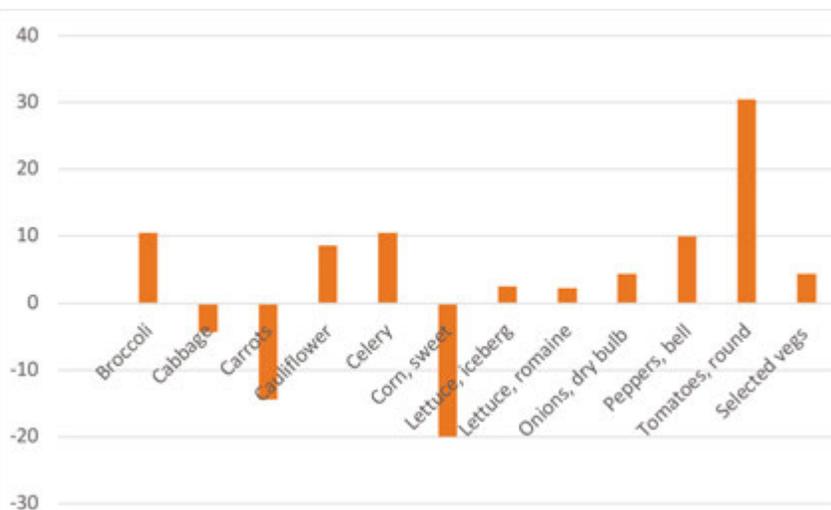
Average employment in California grocery merchant wholesaling and food manufacturing combined is relatively small, about two-thirds of average agricultural employment.

Shipments of U.S. Fresh Fruit Through Mid-October 2020 Were Similar to 2019



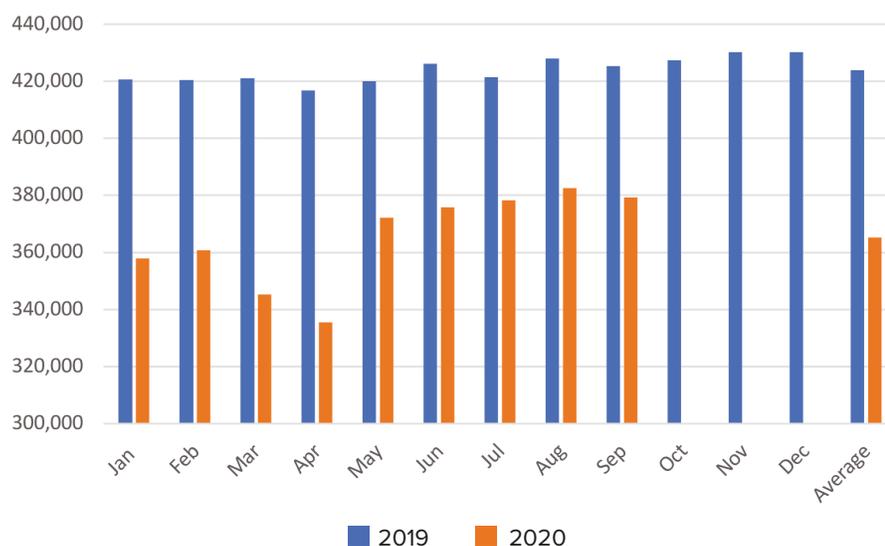
Source: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/fruit-and-tree-nuts-data/selected-weekly-fruit-movement-and-price/>

Shipments of U.S. Fresh Vegetables Through Mid-October 2020 Were Similar to 2019



Source: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/vegetables-and-pulses-data/selected-weekly-fresh-market-vegetable-movement-and-price/>

California's Average Agricultural Employment Was 14% Lower in 2020 Than in 2019



More H-2A Workers

Second, there were more reports of Covid among nonfarm food processing and meatpacking workers than among farm workers. Food processing and meatpacking workers often work in close proximity in plants that have hundreds of employees and are sometimes cold and wet, allowing Covid to linger. Over 40,000 of the 500,000 U.S. meatpacking workers tested positive for Covid by September 2020, and over 200 died.

There were Covid outbreaks among H-2A guest workers, who are often housed four to a room in bunk beds. The largest California outbreaks were in coastal counties that employ H-2A workers to harvest strawberries and vegetables.

Accelerating Change

Third, rising labor costs and uncertainty about the availability of healthy workers accelerated three major changes that were underway before

Covid: more mechanization, more H-2 workers, and more imports. Labor-saving mechanization reduces the need for hand labor, while harvesting aids make hand workers more productive. Researchers and private firms are developing new plant varieties, machines, and management systems to reduce the need for hand labor in commodities from apples to watermelons.

Private firms are producing mechanical aids that make workers more productive, such as robots in table grapes and conveyor belts in strawberries. Reducing the need to lift and carry harvested fruits and vegetables allows fewer workers to harvest more and makes farm jobs more attractive to women and older workers.

Second, the H-2A guest worker program tripled in size between FY12 and FY19, so that over 15,000 employer petitions were approved to fill almost 258,000 farm jobs with H-2A workers in FY19 (some employers filed multiple petitions). Almost 205,000 H-2A visas were issued in FY19.

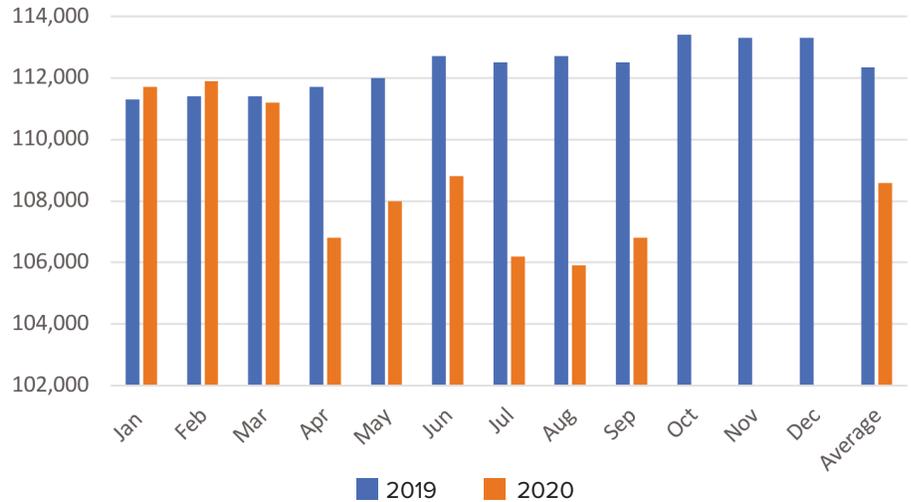
H-2A guest workers are in the US for an average of six months, so they fill almost 10 percent of the 1.1 million year-round equivalent jobs in U.S. crop agriculture. H-2A workers are about half as important in today's farm workforce as Braceros were at their peak in the mid-1950s, when 450,000 Braceros were 20 percent of average US crop employment.

H-2A workers are especially important in California strawberries and vegetables, East Coast and Washington apples, Florida citrus, and North Carolina tobacco and vegetables. Almost all of the sheepherders caring for flocks on public lands in western states have H-2A visas, and many of the operators of custom combines that harvest wheat from Kansas to Canada are H-2A visa holders.

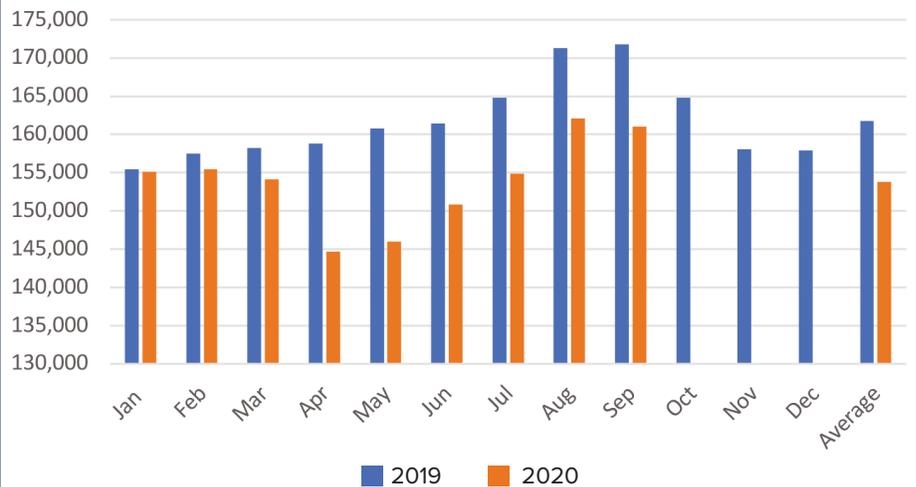
Third, imports of fresh fruit and vegetable commodities are increasing. Over half of U.S. fresh fruit, and a third of US fresh vegetables, are imported, and the import shares of most fresh fruits and vegetables are rising.

Producers in Mexico and other countries with lower labor costs use the same plant varieties and production techniques as U.S. farmers to produce fruits and vegetables for Americans; many farms in Mexico have U.S. farmers and buyers as investors and partners. Free-trade agreements and science-based standards to deal with pest and disease threats have lowered barriers to trade in farm commodities and allowed the import share of major fruits and vegetables to rise over time.

Average employment in CA grocery merchant wholesaling was 3% lower in 2020 than in 2019



Average employment in CA food manufacturing was 5% lower in 2020 than in 2019



Covid Outbreaks Were More Common Among Nonfarm Food Processing Workers Than Farm Workers

To slow the spread of COVID-19 in meat and poultry processing facilities:

- Screen workers for symptoms
- Increase space between workers
- Enhance cleaning and disinfection
- Provide multilingual education/training

cdc.gov [bit.ly/MMWR5120b](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6918e3.htm) MMWR

Source: <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6918e3.htm>

Guest worker outbreaks in California



Rancho Nuevo Harvesting, Santa Barbara County

- Sickened: 12 workers, outbreak ongoing
- Pick: cilantro, celery, strawberries
- Sold at: Trader Joe's, others
- Permitted to employ 1,409 guest workers in California



Alco Harvesting, Santa Barbara County

- Sickened: 91 people, one death, outbreak ongoing
- Pick: strawberries, romaine, celery for Signature Farms (Albertsons store brand), others
- Permitted to employ 315 guest workers in California



Elkhorn Packing, Monterey County

- Sickened: As many as nine workers
- Pick: strawberries, anise, beets, butter leaf lettuce, celery, more
- Permitted to employ 1,209 workers in California



Villa Las Brisas housing facility in Ventura County

- Companies involved: Venegas Farming, Elkhorn Packing and Royal Oak Ag Services
- Sickened: 204 people at one guest worker labor camp
- Pick: strawberries, blueberries, avocados and lemons
- Venegas Farming has permission to employ 12 guest workers in California; Royal Oak Ag Services employs 792



Magaña Labor Services, Ventura County

- Sickened: 28 people
- Pick: avocado and citrus for Villa Park Orchards Association, which grows for Sunkist
- Permitted to employ 64 guest workers in California



Wawona Packing, Fresno County

- Sickened: about 16 people
- Pack: stone fruit
- Permitted to employ 108 guest workers in California

Robotic Apple Pickers Reduce Labor Needs by 90%



Harvesting Aids Reduce Carrying and Increase Worker Productivity by 10 to 20%



15,000 Employer Requests to Fill 258,000 Farm Jobs With H-2A Workers Were Approved in FY19

Farmer requests
H-2A job approval from
Department of Labor

Farmer petitions U.S.
Citizenship and
Immigration Services

Workers apply for
H-2A visas from
State Department

LABOR
CERTIFICATION
257,667 jobs



FARMER
PETITION
15,380 petitions

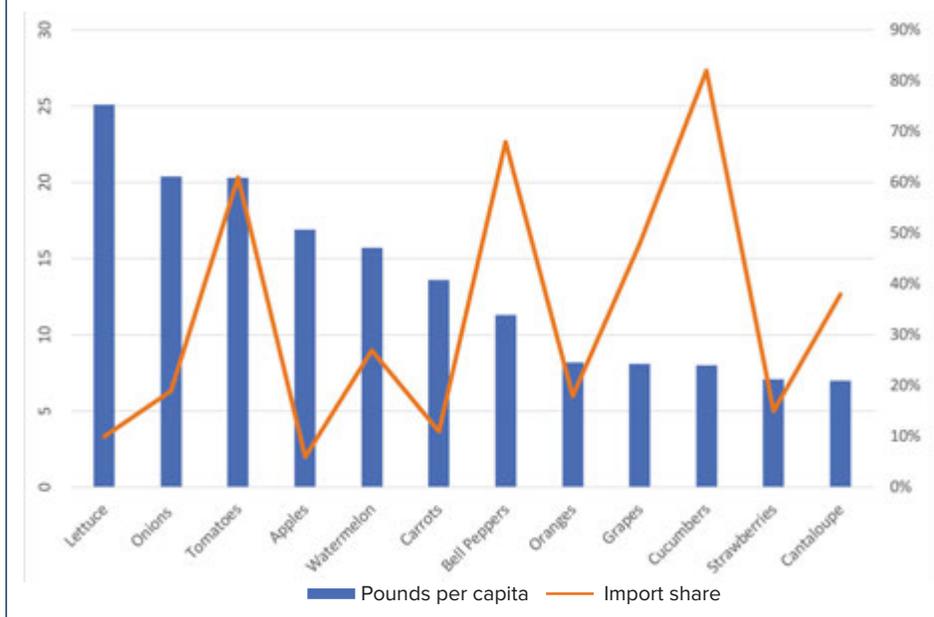


VISA
APPLICATION
204,791 visas

The Number of Jobs Certified to be Filled With H-2A Workers
 Rose Especially Fast in CA, GA, and WA Between FY10 and FY20

Top States of Employment		
	FY 2010	FY 2020
Washington	3,013	26,678
Georgia	4,874	24,195
Florida	4,542	21,361
North Carolina	9,793	20,677
California	2,329	20,615

The Import Share of Major Fresh Fruits and Vegetables in 2019 Ranged
 From 6% for Lettuce to 82% for Cucumbers



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