

Rural Migration News

Blog 310

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California Farm Employment and Farm Workers

California agriculture employs up to 900,000 workers sometime during a typical year to fill 425,000 full-time equivalent jobs, that is, average employment is 425,000, but more than twice this many unique individuals are employed on the state’s farms sometime during the year due to seasonality and worker turnover.

About 90 percent of the state’s hired farm workers were born in Mexico. Of the average 880,000 unique farm workers in recent years, almost 800,000 were born in Mexico, including over 770,000 who are settled in the US and

30,000 who work in California seasonally as H-2A workers.

Most of the settled Mexican-born farm workers were in their 20s and 30s when they arrived in the 1990s and early 2000s and are now in their 40s and 50s. Over half of settled Mexican-born farm workers are unauthorized, and most have US-born and -educated children who shun seasonal farm jobs.

The fresh blood in the farm workforce are Mexican H-2A workers who are a decade younger than settled Mexican-born workers and who often brought to farms by farm labor

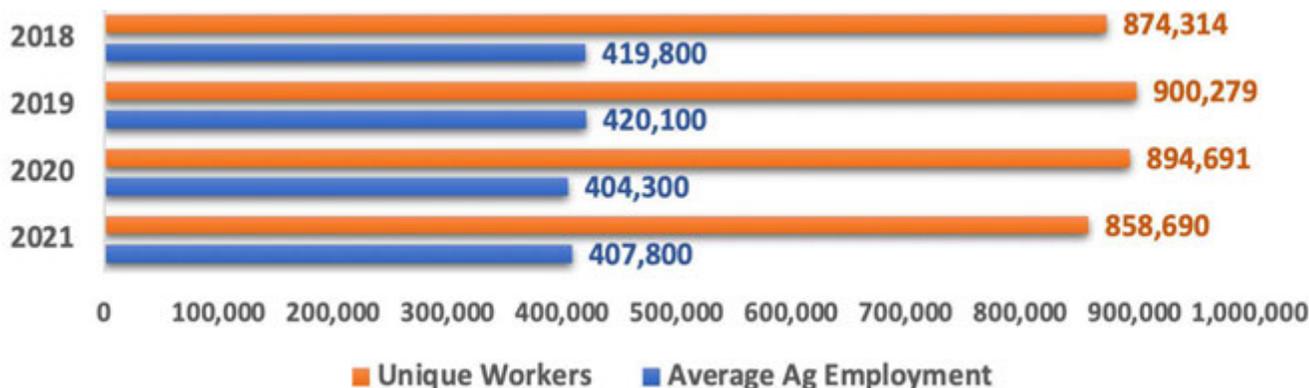
contractors. H-2A workers cost more per hour, often \$25 to \$30 including transportation, housing, and other costs, versus \$20 to \$25 an hour for US workers, including wages, benefits, and payroll taxes. However, H-2A workers are 15 to 30 percent more productive than settled US workers and are tied by contracts to their employers, which provides labor insurance to producers of perishable crops.

California has a third of US farm employment and 10 percent of US H-2A workers. Half of US farm employment is in the Pacific states of CA, OR, and WA, where the H-2A program is expanding rapidly. Within California, the H-2A program is expanding fastest in coastal areas, where high housing costs are shrinking the settled farm workforce.

Employment

Average employment in California agriculture (NAICS 11) rose in the 21st century, from 376,000 in 2002 to a peak of 424,000 in 2016 before falling during covid to 410,000 in 2020 and 2021. The number of agricultural establishments fell from 23,600 to 16,900 between 2001 and 2021, down 28 percent, and average weekly wages rose over 100 percent to \$784 in 2021.

There is a 2-1 Ratio Between Unique Workers and Average Employment in California Agriculture



California has 90% Settled Mexican-Born Workers and 5% H-2A Workers



Employment in California agriculture rose slower than overall California employment. Average UI-covered employment in California rose by 15 percent to 14.6 million between 2001 and 2021, and average weekly wages rose 111 percent to \$1,660. Weekly wages in agriculture were about half of average statewide weekly wages between 2001 and 2021. The ratio of farm to nonfarm wages peaked at 52 percent in 2016 and was 47 percent in 2021, which was the average farm-non-farm wage ratio in the 21st century.

There are three major subsectors within agriculture: crops, livestock, and crop support. Direct-hire employment in crops (111) averaged 158,000 in 2021 and ranged from a high of 177,000 in October to a low of 130,000 in January, a peak-trough ratio of 1.4. Direct-hire crop employment fell 10 percent between 2001 and 2021, and the number of crop establishments fell a third, from 14,200 to 9,300. Average weekly wages more than doubled in nominal terms to \$833 a week in 2021, and rose faster between 2011 and 2021 than in the first decade of the 21st century.

Employment in California livestock (112) was stable in the 21st century at 28,000, with little month-to-month variation. Livestock workers are concentrating on fewer and larger farms; the number of livestock establishments fell 30 percent from 2001 to 2021, from 3,600 to 2,500. The average weekly wages of livestock workers doubled in nominal terms to \$930 a week in 2021, almost \$100 a week more than for direct-hire crop workers.

Crop support employment (1151) rose 40 percent in the 21st century to an average 217,000 in 2021. BLS does not provide monthly employment data for crop support establishments, which likely have higher peak-trough ratios than direct-hire

Most U.S.-Educated Children of Seasonal Farm Workers Shun Farm Work



Most H-2A Workers are Younger and More Productive than U.S. Farm Workers



crop establishments because non-farm crop support employers often bring workers to farms to perform specific seasonal tasks. Some crop support employers keep their employees busy year-round, but most hire workers to fill crews as needed.

The number of crop support establishments rose from 3,200 to 3,700 between 2001 and 2021; average crop support employment has been higher than direct-hire crop employment since 2010. The average weekly wages of crop support workers are \$100 lower than for direct hires, \$717 versus \$833 in 2021, but crop support wages rose faster, up 140 percent between 2001 and 2021 versus up 115 percent for direct hires.

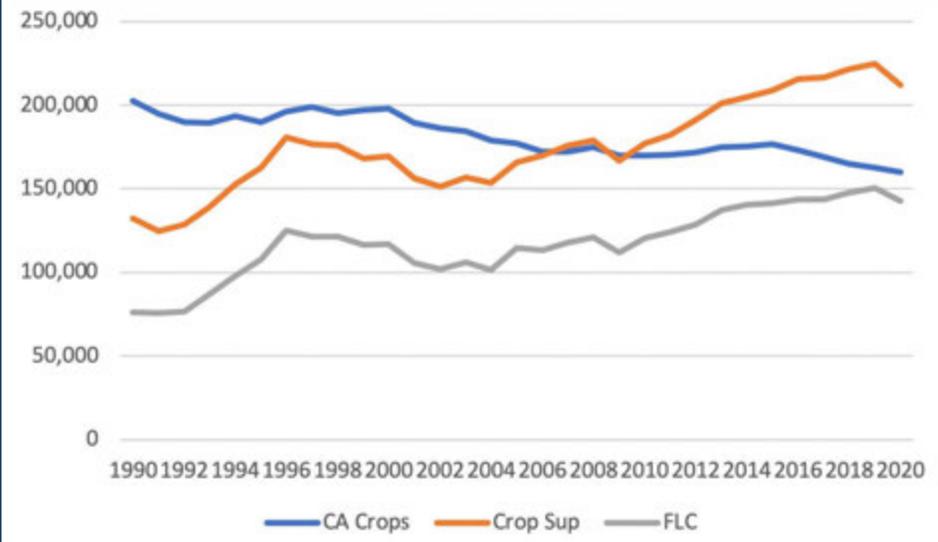
Two thirds of crop support employment is with FLCs (115115), an average 150,000 in 2021. Average FLC employment rose by 40 percent between 2001 and 2021, and the number of FLC establishments rose by 36 percent, from 1,100 to 1,500. The average weekly wages of FLC employees are the lowest of any sector, \$607 a week in 2021, but rose fastest, up 164 percent between 2001 and 2021.

Implications

Employment trends highlight three features of California agriculture. First, California requires almost all employers to register and report their farm employment and wages to EDD, making QCEW data a census of farm employment. QCEW data show that average employment in California agriculture (NAICS 11) peaked in 2016 at 424,000 and fell three percent to about 410,000 in 2020 and 2021. It is not yet clear if agricultural employment will rebound after covid.

Second, fruits and nuts account for 60 percent of California's aver-

Direct-Hire Crop Employment (Blue) Fell as CS (Orange) and FLC (Gray) Employment Rose



age direct-hire crop employment, and 60 percent of average fruit and nut employment is in grapes, strawberries, and other berries. Grape employment declined over 50 percent in the 21st century to an average 17,000 in 2021, strawberry employment more than doubled to 25,000, and other berry employment rose 2.5 times to 10,000.

Third, indirect hiring of farm workers is becoming more important. Since 2010, more workers have been brought to farms by crop support firms than were hired directly, and this gap has been widening. For

each 100 workers on crop farms, 60 were brought there by crop support services and 40 were hired directly. Two-thirds of crop support services employment are FLCs, and average FLC employment will soon be larger than direct-hire crop employment (147,000 versus 158,000 in 2021).

Farm Workers

DOL's National Agricultural Workers Survey interviewed 3,582 non-H-2A crop workers in California between 2015 and 2019, almost 900 a year, and found that these workers are aging, settling in one place with one

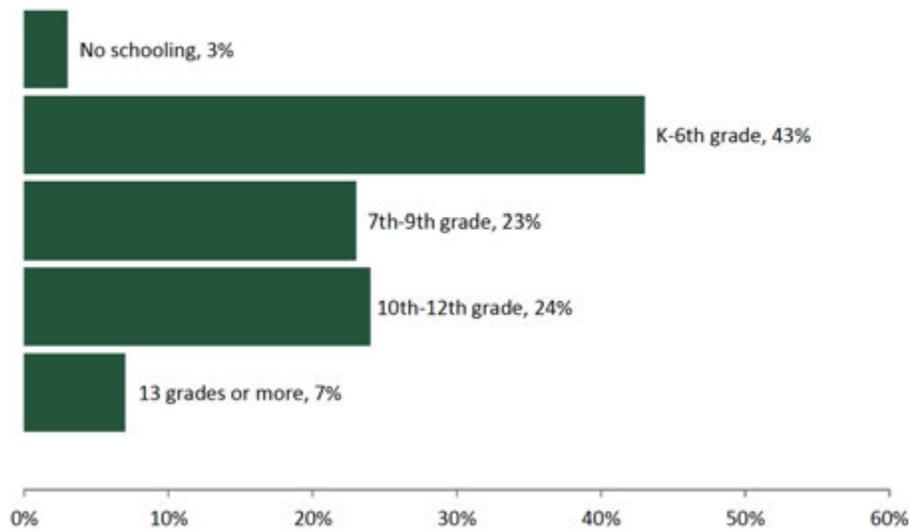
NAWS Crop Workers were 85% Born in Mexico, in the U.S. 10 to 20 Years, in Their 40s, and with an Average 8 Years of Schooling



Source: <https://www.kvpr.org/2021-12-02/guest-farmworkers-will-receive-a-wage-increase-in-2022>

70% of California NAWS Workers had Less than 10 Years of Schooling

California farmworkers' average educational attainment was 8th grade.



Since QCEW data find that 60 percent of California workers who are employed on crop farms are brought there by nonfarm crop support services, the NAWS may not fully reflect workers who are brought to farms by FLCs. About 30 percent of the workers interviewed in the California NAWS were employed by FLCs, while FLC employment was 42 percent of average employment in California crop agriculture when crop support (1151) and direct-hire employment (111) are combined.

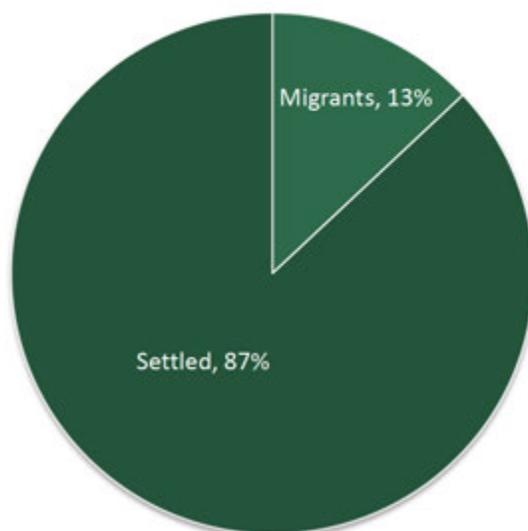
The California NAWS found that the state's crop workers were 70 percent men who were an average 40 years old, including a sixth who were 55 or older. Almost two-thirds were married, and almost 60 percent were parents. Those with minor children had an average two children under 18 living with them, including 30 percent with three or more minor children. Almost 85 percent of NAWS interviewees were born in Mexico, and 80 percent had been in the US at least 10 years.

California crop workers had an average eight years of schooling. Almost 90 percent said that Spanish was their primary language; only three percent reported an indigenous language. A sixth said that they can speak and read English well, but 70 percent could not speak any or much English, and three-fourths could read little or no English.

An eighth of California crop workers migrated, typically commuting between homes in Mexico and a California residence. Most migrants had one farm employer in California, while fewer than five percent had at least two US farm jobs at least 75 miles apart or had a home base in the US and traveled at least 75 miles from that home base to do farm work. However, workers employed by a FLC may work on

1/8 of Farm Workers Migrated, and 2/3 of Migrants Moved from a Home in Mexico to a California Farm Job

Nearly 90 percent of farmworkers were settled



farm employer, and are half unauthorized. The personal incomes of settled farm workers averaged \$2,000 a month from farm earnings of about \$600 a week for 35 to 40 weeks a year. Most settled California crop workers want to continue to do farm work as long as they can.

Half of the California crop workers were unauthorized, 30 percent were legal immigrants, and 20 percent were US citizens.

The California NAWS interviews mostly workers who are hired directly by growers and who are performing non-harvesting jobs.

Three-Fourths of NAWS Workers were Employed in Fruits and Vegetables; FLCs and Migrants were Most Common in Fruits

Figure 5.1: Primary Crop at Time of Interview, 2015–2019

Crop at Time of Interview	All California Farmworkers	Employed by Grower	Employed by Farm		
			Labor Contractor	Migrant Farmworkers	Settled Farmworkers
Fruits and Nuts	54%	55%	52%	51%	54%
Vegetables	25%	20%	39% ^a	30%	25%
Horticulture	14%	18%	3 ^a	7% ^a	15%
Field Crops	5%	6%	^b	5% ^a	4%
Miscellaneous	^b	1%	^b	^b	2% ^a

One Quarter of NAWS Workers were Harvesting; FLC Employees and Migrants were More Likely to be Harvesting

Figure 5.2: Primary Task at Time of Interview, 2015–2019

Primary Task at Time of Interview	All California Farmworkers	Employed by Grower	Employed by Farm		
			Labor Contractor	Migrant Farmworkers	Settled Farmworkers
Pre-harvest	25%	26%	23%	24%	25%
Harvest	23%	21%	28%	32%	21%
Post-harvest	19%	18%	24% ^a	15% ^a	20%
Technical Production	33%	36%	25%	29%	33%

NAWS Workers Earned More than the Minimum Wage, and More in Harvesting than in Non-Harvesting Jobs

Figure 5.5: Average Hourly Wage by Farmworker Characteristic, 2015–2019

Farmworker Characteristic	Average Hourly Wage
All California farmworkers	\$12.13
Paid by the hour	\$11.61
Paid by the piece	\$14.87
Paid combination hourly wage and piece rate	\$19.55^a
Salary or Other	\$18.09
With current employer 1 to 2 years	\$11.55
With current employer 3 to 5 years	\$11.96
With current employer 6 to 10 years	\$12.25
With current employer 11 or more years	\$13.02
Performed pre-harvest tasks at time of interview	\$11.71
Performed harvest tasks at time of interview	\$12.86
Performed post-harvest tasks at time of interview	\$12.16
Performed technical production tasks at time of interview	\$11.93

multiple farms that are over 75 miles apart, but are not regarded as migrants if they have only one employer.

Almost all crop workers live off the farm where they work and commute to their farm jobs by car or truck. Two-thirds of crop workers rented housing from someone other than their employer, 20 percent lived in

homes owned by themselves or a family member, and 10 percent lived in employer-provided housing. Three fourths of crop workers lived within 24 miles of the farm where they worked.

Over 70 percent of California crop workers were employed directly by farm operators, and over 70 percent found their current farm

job via friends or relatives. Over 54 percent were employed in fruits and nuts, 25 percent were employed in vegetables, and 14 percent were in horticulture and nursery commodities.

A quarter of the workers were harvesting when interviewed, while a third were in technical production tasks such as pruning, irrigating, and operating equipment, a quarter were in pre-harvest tasks such as thinning and weeding, and a fifth were in post-harvest activities such as packing.

Over the 2015-19 period, California crop workers earned an average \$12.13 an hour, including \$11.61 per hour for workers paid hourly wages and \$14.87 an hour for workers earning piece rates. The California minimum wage was \$9 in 2015, \$10 in 2016, \$10.50 in 2017, \$11 in 2018, and \$12 in 2019 for employers with 26 or more employees, suggesting that crop workers earned more than the state's minimum wage.

Over 85 percent of the NAWS workers were paid hourly wages. Piece rate workers averaged 44 hours during the previous week and earned almost \$15 an hour for a weekly wage of \$654, while workers who were paid hourly wages averaged 48 hours at \$11.61 for a weekly wage of \$557.

Implications

Farm worker data highlight three items. First, is the aging of settled and often unauthorized crop workers who arrived during the period of large-scale unauthorized Mexico-US migration before the 2008-09 recession. Most of these settled workers have relatively little education, have US-born children, and want to continue to do farm work. Most settled Mexican farm workers do not migrate from one farm to

another within California, but some are employed by FLCs and move between farms that are more than 75 miles apart.

Second, the NAWS interviews a subset of farm workers, non-H-2A workers who are usually employed directly by crop farmers. Three fourths of NAWS workers are employed directly and work on only one farm each year. Harvesting is often the most labor-intensive task on farms, and harvest workers are often brought to farms by FLCs to pick fruits and vegetables. FLC employees who may be on farms only for short periods may not be interviewed in the NAWS in proportion to their share of the farm workforce.

Third, the dynamic and growing H-2A share of the farm workforce is not interviewed by the NAWS. The limited data available on H-2As suggest that they tend to be younger and more productive than aging and settled workers, which helps to offset the higher recruitment, travel, and housing costs of H-2As. If current trends continue, H-2As will likely increase their share of California farm workforce from the current five percent.

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