



International Labour Office

Migrant Workers in Commercial Agriculture

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This study is part of a larger ILO effort to close knowledge gaps regarding labour issues in economic sectors where migrant workers can be found in considerable numbers, such as agriculture, construction and mining.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report assesses the employment of international migrant workers in the agricultural sectors of high-income countries. Its purpose is to assess the employment of international migrants in industrial country agriculture in selected countries and the programs that admit agricultural guest workers in order to draw conclusions and make recommendations to the ILO and its tripartite partners to improve protections for migrant guest workers employed in agriculture.

Agriculture, the production of food and fiber on farms, employs a third of the world's workers, more than any other industry. An increasing share of the workers employed in industrial-country agriculture are hired or wage workers, and many of these hired farm workers are international migrants from poorer countries.

Agricultural employment and internal migration to fill seasonal farm jobs declines with economic growth. As a result, the share of international migrants in the farm work force increases over time, especially when the supply of local labor falls faster than demand. Most governments respond to the "farm labor shortages" that occur when local workers shun farm jobs faster than labor-saving technology or imports eliminate farm jobs with a combination of:

1. toleration of local workers who are employed on farms "off the books" while collecting social benefits,
2. foreigners who have visitor, student, and similar visas while doing farm work and,
3. guest and irregular workers from poorer countries.

This report focuses on guest workers from poorer countries admitted to fill farm jobs in industrial countries.


Agriculture provides jobs and wages for workers who cannot find better jobs, both local and foreign. Migrant workers, in turn, sustain labor-intensive crop production in high-income countries and in some cases enable its expansion. Protecting the local and foreign workers employed in seasonal agriculture is challenging. Workers are dispersed across farms and may not know their rights. Even if they are aware of their workplace rights, local workers may not complain because they see their jobs as short-term means to earn extra money rather than careers, while guest workers may not complain for fear of being blacklisted and unable to return next season.

This report is based on a review of the relevant data and literature and interviews with key informants in government, agricultural employer organizations, and workers' organizations. There are four case studies of guest worker programs: Canada, New Zealand-Australia, Spain, and the US.

Migrants and Commercial Agriculture

There are five major conclusions:

1. International migrants provide vital skills and labor to agriculture in many countries, both industrial and developing, and labor-intensive crop agriculture provides income-earning opportunities for migrants. The share of international migrants in the farm workforce is rising in most industrial countries and in many middle-income developing countries, while internal migration to fill seasonal farm jobs is declining. Most international migrants employed in agriculture in high-income countries are male, often three-fourths or more.
2. The seasonal farm labor market often operates in ways that lead to inefficiencies and a lack of worker protections. Ideally, a central register would list jobs and workers available so that farm work could be done with minimum un- and underemployment for workers. In reality, workers are often organized into crews by contractors and other intermediaries who arrange a series of jobs for their crews in a decentralized system with perverse incentives. Since farm employers do not pay for waiting time, they have an incentive to request too many workers too soon to ensure that their crops are picked in a timely way. Contractors, on the other hand, have an incentive to promise more workers than they have available, and to promise them sooner, to win the farmer's business. The result are simultaneous shortages and surpluses of farm labor, with farmer complaints of labor shortages typically receiving more publicity than the worker unemployment that occurs while waiting for jobs to begin.
3. The agricultural job pyramid is short and steep, with few workers able to climb the ladder from seasonal to year-round worker or farm operator for reasons that range from legal obstacles to buying land and lack of capital. Most farms are privately owned, and few have systems to identify qualified seasonal workers and help them to become supervisors and eventually business partners. Instead, many farms rely on a few year-round workers and outsource seasonal jobs to contractors, limiting farmer interaction with seasonal crews and the potential for farmers to identify good workers and promote them.
4. International migrants who fill seasonal farm jobs on commercial farms in higher-income countries vary widely in education and skills, from teachers who pick fruit crops during summer vacations to subsistence farmers with little education who work seasonally or year-round abroad. Most international migrants employed in agriculture are men, in part because employers must often provide housing for guest workers, and they hire one sex to reduce housing costs. They often have high injury and illness rates due to carrying and lifting, often over uneven ground, and the risks posed by pesticides and other chemicals. Relatively few farm workers are represented by trade



unions, and governments often have difficulty enforcing labor and health and safety laws in agriculture because few workers complain of violations.

5. Government policies toward hired farm workers are not consistent. Many governments enact protective labor laws after particular incidents involving farm worker protests or injuries, but few have policies to encourage farm employers to abide by these laws and raise labor standards and productivity over time so that agriculture provides higher-wage and safer jobs for more skilled workers. Instead, many governments tolerate unauthorized workers and inadequately protected guest workers, substandard housing, and other deficiencies under the argument that forcing costly labor changes on farmers would drive them out of business, increase food imports, and eliminate “good nonfarm jobs” for local workers in upstream or downstream industries.

For more information visit the ILO topical portal on Labour Migration

<http://www.ilo.org/migration>

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