

Trump, Migration, and Agriculture

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Agriculture and Farm Labor

The Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) is an administrative database that gathers a near census of employment and earnings across all North American Industry Classification (NAICS) codes (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025a). The QCEW gathers information from all employers who must report employment and wages to their respective state unemployment insurance (UI) authorities. The 115,000 US agricultural employers (NAICS code 11) employ an average of 1.2 million workers, including an average of 850,000 in crops (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025a). UI covers an estimated 85% of US farm employment, suggesting that there are 1.5 million average or year-round equivalent jobs in US agriculture. Some 2.5 million workers fill these jobs, including 2 million workers who were born in Mexico. These Mexican-born US farm workers comprise three groups: 850,000 are legal Mexican-born farm workers, 850,000 are unauthorized, and 300,000 are legal H-2A guest workers (Martin, 2024; Justice in Motion, 2025). The ratio of unique workers to average jobs is 1.7 due to seasonality and turnover.

According to the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS), most unauthorized farm workers arrived in the 1990s and early 2000s when they were in their 20s and 30s (US Department of Labor, 2025). These workers are now in their 40s and 50s, settled in one place, and aging out of hand-labor tasks that require climbing, stooping, and lifting. Their US-educated children usually shun seasonal farm jobs.

Unauthorized migration rose during the Biden administration, but few of these newcomers became crop workers. Figure 1 shows the number of unauthorized farm workers employed in US agriculture for less than a year before being interviewed in the NAWS was over 20% in 2000 and 5% in 2021–2022 (US Department of Labor, 2025). The NAWS finds an experienced and settled farm workforce.

Farming has two major subsectors: crop and animal agriculture. Crop agriculture accounts for three-fourths of US farm employment and almost all seasonal farm jobs. Figure 2 shows average UI-covered employment in crop agriculture, which is comprised of the sum of direct hire crop production (NAICS code 111) and crop support services (NAICS code 1151) on the left axis and crop support employment's share of total crop agricultural employment (NAICS 1151 ÷ [NAICS 111 + 1151]) on the right axis between 2000 and 2024. Average crop employment has been relatively stable at about 850,000 over the past two decades, but a rising share of crop workers, almost 40%, are now brought to farms by nonfarm crop support employers, mostly farm labor contractors.

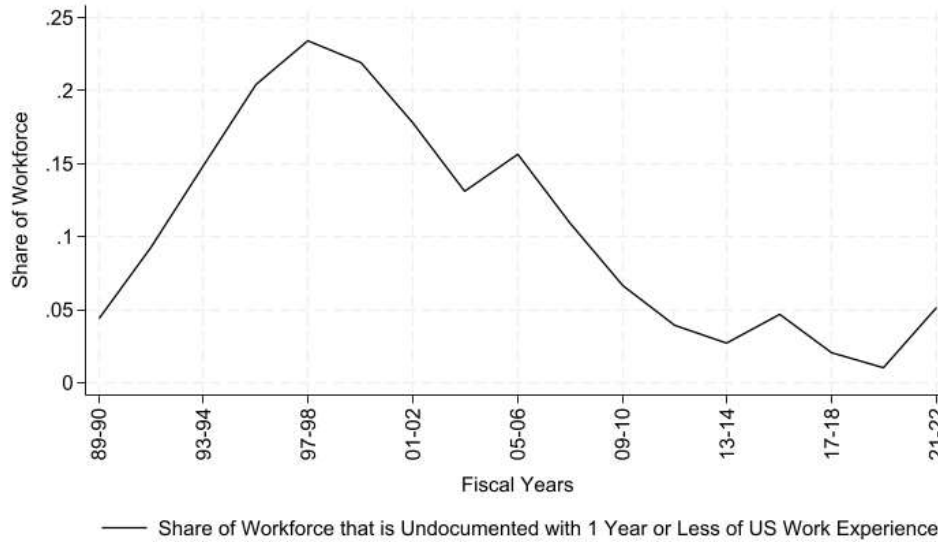
Farm worker earnings of \$18 an hour are two-thirds of the average nonfarm earnings of \$31. Rising farm labor costs lead to labor-saving mechanization (see Figure 3). If Trump 2.0 migration policies increase farm labor costs, the mechanization, migration, and import (MMI) adjustments are likely to accelerate: faster development of labor-saving machines and deployment of mechanical aids, more migrant guest workers, and more imported fresh fruits and vegetables from lower-wage countries.

Figure 4 shows that fruit and vegetable imports increased by over 500% over the past three decades. Mexico is the largest source of imported fruits and vegetables, followed by Chile, Peru, Colombia, Brazil, Guatemala, and Canada.

Trump Migration Policies, Immigration, and H-2A

President Trump signed several Executive Orders (EOs) on the first day of his second term, including the EO “Protecting the American People Against Invasion” by curtailing access to asylum and the EO “Securing the Border,” which resumed construction and repair of fences and walls on the Mexico-US border.

Figure 1. Share of Newcomers Who Are Unauthorized Farmworkers

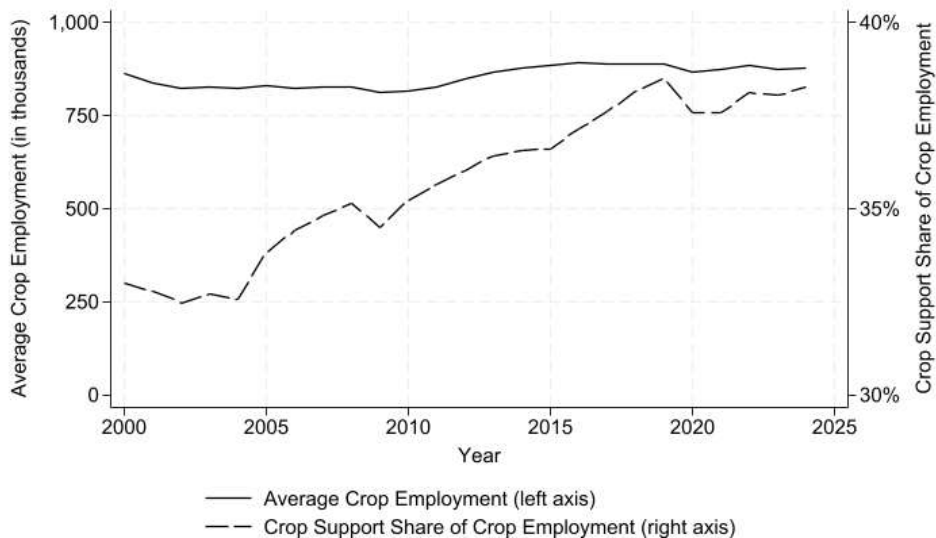


Source: National Agricultural Workers Wages (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025a).

The number of foreign-born US residents increased by 8.2 million under President Biden, more than during the previous three presidents combined (see Figure 5). The newcomers include immigrants, foreigners who received a temporary legal status, and unauthorized foreigners. Even though some Biden-era newcomers have agricultural backgrounds, few became US farm workers. Instead, most went to cities where they had friends or relatives and sought year-round nonfarm rather than seasonal farm jobs (Rural Migration News, 2025a).

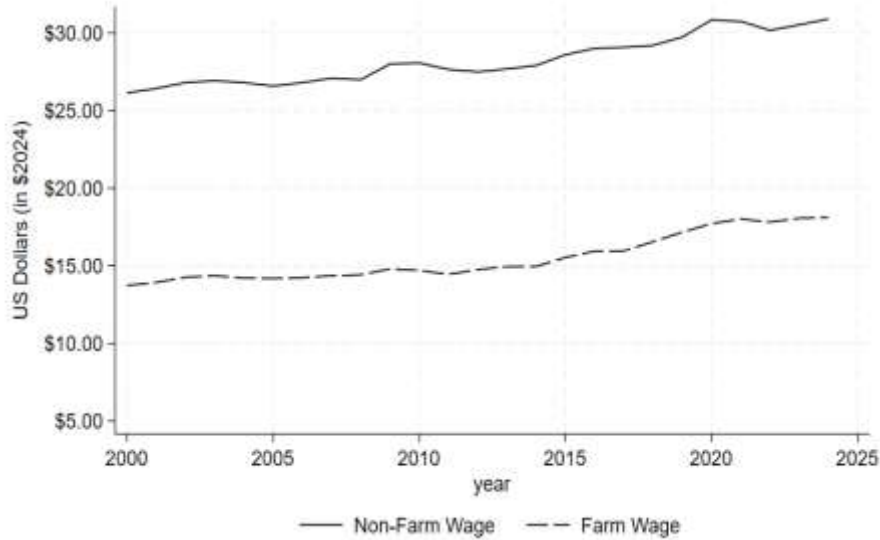
Because the upsurge in immigration did not yield a significant number of new farm workers, the H-2A program expanded from 275,000 jobs certified in fiscal year 2020 to 385,000 in fiscal year 2024 and is likely to top 400,000 in fiscal year 2025. The combination of an aging, settled farm workforce and few newcomers makes the H-2A program a major source of new farm workers.

Figure 2. Average Employment: Crop and Crop Support Services



Source: Quarterly Census of Employment Survey (US Department of Labor, 2025).

Figure 3. Real Farm and Nonfarm Hourly Wages (in 2024 dollars)



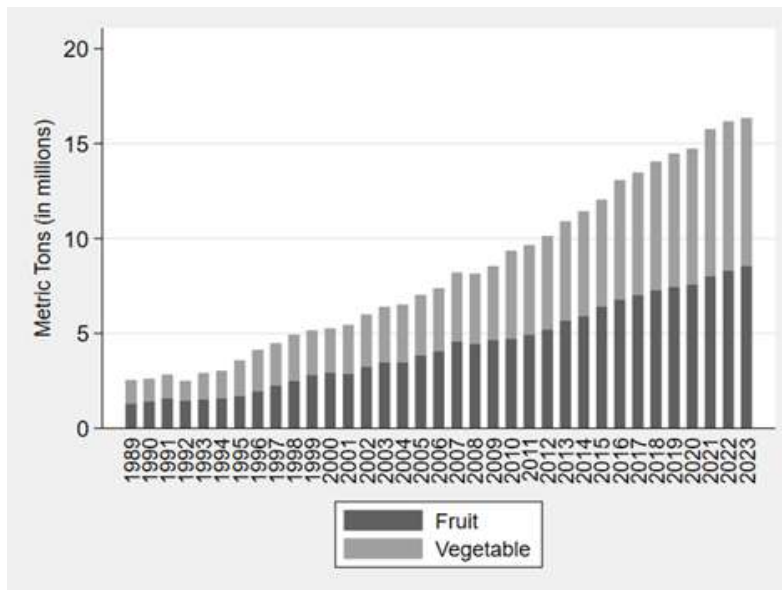
Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics (2025b) and USDA NASS (2025).

The H-2A program allows US farm employers who anticipate shortages of seasonal workers to be certified by the Department of Labor (DOL) to recruit and employ H-2A workers to fill farm jobs that last for up to 10 months. Certified employers submit petitions to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) that, after approval, are forwarded to the Department of State (DOS) consulates abroad, where H-2A visas are issued to the H-2A workers recruited by employers.

Certification means that DOL agrees with the employer that:

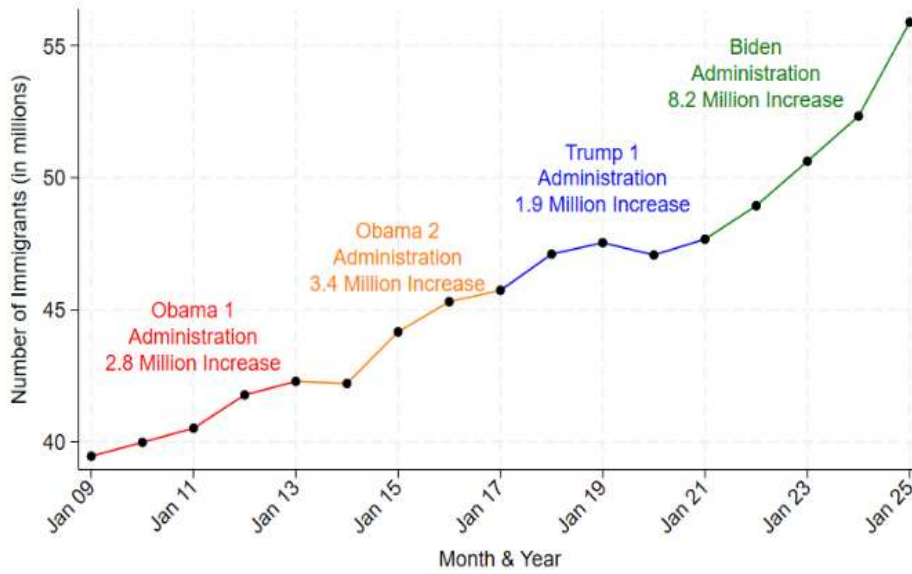
- (A) There are not sufficient US workers who are able, willing, and qualified, and who will be available at the time and place needed, to perform the labor or services involved in the petition and
- (B) The employment of the alien will not adversely affect the wages and working conditions of workers in the United States similarly employed.

Figure 4. Specialty Crop Import Quantities by Crop Type (1989–2023)



Source: USDA FAS (2025).

Figure 5. The Foreign-Born Population Rose by 8.2 Million Under Biden



Source: Current Population Survey, January Samples (Flood et al., 2025).

The major test of the US labor market is a job order that describes the job and offers the Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR), a minimum wage established by DOL to prevent adverse effects on US workers. AEWRs in 2025 range from \$15 to \$20 an hour across states, higher than the federal or state minimum wage in every state (see Figure 6). Few US workers apply for the “H-2A jobs” that are advertised on the government website seasonaljobs.dol.gov.

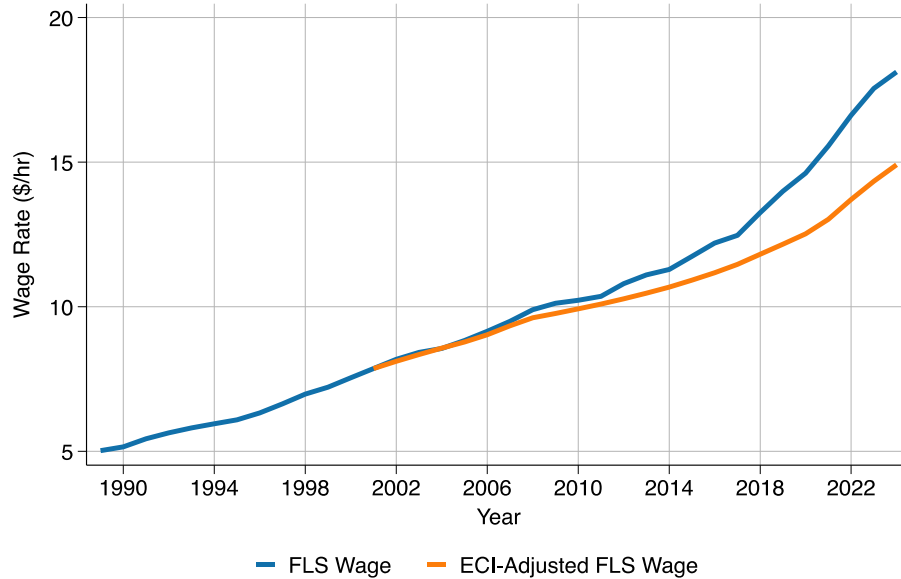
Farmers complain that the H-2A program is bureaucratic and costly. Employers must begin the process at least 60 days before their need date, cooperate with State Workforce Agencies to try to recruit US workers, and have the free housing they must provide to H-2A workers inspected before workers arrive. Employers pay all costs incurred by H-2A workers, including the cost of securing a visa at a US consulate abroad and transportation to the US, so that farmers have at least \$1,500 invested in each H-2A worker upon arrival

Figure 6. 2025 AEWRs and Change from 2024



Source: USDA Farm Labor Survey (USDA NASS, 2025) and VGN (2025).

Figure 7. FLS Average Earnings Rose Faster Than Employment Cost Index Wage and Salary Costs over the Past Decade



Note: Applies the Employment Cost Index for all wage and salary private industry workers to adjust FLS hourly earnings each year since 2001 (USDA NASS, 2025; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2025c)

(Castillo, Martin, and Rutledge, 2024). While in the US, the cost of housing and rides to and from the workplace ranges from \$10 to \$30 a day.

Farm employers want to reduce the cost of H-2A workers by freezing the AEWR. The AEWR for farm job titles is the average hourly earnings of directly hired field and livestock workers reported by farmers to the USDA's Farm Labor Survey (FLS) the previous year. Over the past decade, FLS average earnings have been increasing faster than the Employment Cost Index for nonfarm workers (Figure 7).

The 2025 AEWR for nonfarm job titles such as agricultural truck drivers and construction workers who work on farms is drawn from DOL's Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) program, which collects data from nonfarm employers. When DOL used the OEWS to set AEWRs for nonfarm H-2A job titles in 2023, AEWRs for some agricultural truck drivers doubled from \$15 to \$30 an hour.

The bipartisan Farm Workforce Modernization Act approved by the House in 2019 and 2021 would cap annual AEWR increases at 3.25% while the government studied the need for AEWRs to protect US farm workers; other proposals would set AEWRs at 10% or 15% more than the applicable federal or state minimum wage. Some farm employers want DOL to define and measure adverse effects before establishing an AEWR, which would give employers and other stakeholders an opportunity to affect the definition of adverse effects and the methodology to measure adverse labor market effects.

California sheep and goat herders provide a natural experiment in employer adjustments to higher labor costs. Almost all of California's 350 herders who care for flocks of 500–1,500 animals are H-2A workers from Peru and Mexico. California raised the minimum monthly wage for range herders with 24/7 work schedules by 120% over six years, from \$2,200 a month in 2019 to \$4,820 a month in 2025.

The range of the herder wage increase was triple the increase in the state's minimum wage, which rose 40%, from \$11 (for businesses with fewer than 25 employees) or \$12 to \$16.50 an hour. In 2025, California H-2A range herders earn more than H-2A workers with 40-hour workweeks who harvest fruits and vegetables at the AEWR of \$19.97 an hour, which is about \$3,450 for 4.33 weeks a month.

US workers are not filling California herder jobs, despite annual salaries of almost \$60,000 a year plus free housing and food. Instead, California ranchers are adjusting to higher labor costs by increasing the number of animals each herder cares for, switching to hourly wage systems and paying the AEWR for 40 or 45 hours a week, or going out of business.

In October 2025, the US Department of Labor announced a rule that changes the data source and methodology used to generate the AEWRs, claiming that it will save employers about \$2.5 billion per year. These new changes will likely be challenged in court.

Farm employers want other changes to the H-2A program, including allowing employers with year-round

Figure 8. Americans Believe That Deportations Could Increase the Prices They Pay



Note: Numbers listed in yellow are the percentage of respondents for each question asking whether the deportation of immigrants living in the US illegally would increase, decrease, or have no effect on prices. Data were obtained from a Pew Research Center report (Noe-Bustamante and Krogstad, 2025).

labor needs to utilize the H-2A program and issuing H-2A workers with multiyear visas, permitting the staggered employment of H-2A workers in a single contract, and reducing the domestic employee recruitment period to 30 days (Rutledge and Rickman, 2024). Some employers want an electronic application processing platform and a TSA-style precheck program for H-2A employers who are in compliance with regulations.

Short-Term Impacts

The major short-term impacts of Trump's migration policies are fear and confusion. Border encounters fell from a peak of 250,000 in December 2023 to less than 10,000 a month in mid-2025, but this drop had few effects on the farm labor supply because few unauthorized newcomers become farm workers. However, over 40% of Americans believe that mass deportations will increase food prices (see Figure 8).

The fear arises from well-publicized efforts to arrest unauthorized foreigners inside the US, including the 1.2 million foreigners with final orders of deportation. DHS has taken the gloves off Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers, instructing them to arrest all unauthorized foreigners they encounter when seeking foreigners convicted of US crimes.

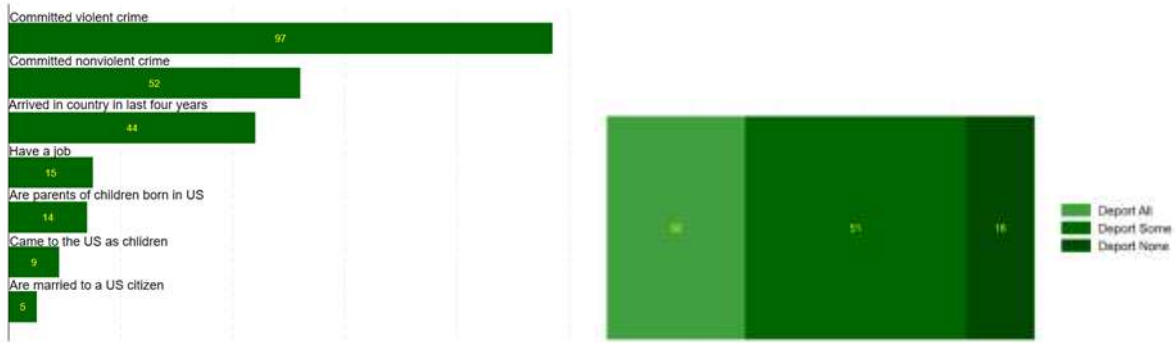
Most Americans want foreigners convicted of US crimes deported, and many support deporting unauthorized foreigners who arrived in the past four years (see Figure 9). Support for deportation declines sharply for unauthorized foreigners who have US jobs, US-born children, or US spouses.

To provide insights into the labor supply effects of Trump's deportation policies, we utilized ICE arrest data to map out the recent increase in ICE arrests across the United States, revealing a sharp increase in the first six months of 2025 (see Figure 10). However, according to the Current Population Survey (Flood et al., 2025), agricultural employment has remained relatively stable during the first eight months of 2025 relative to 2024 (see Figure 11).

There is fear and confusion in many immigrant communities. For example, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in March 2025 began to enforce a long-standing requirement that non-US citizens 14 and older who are in the US for at least 30 days must register or face fines of \$5,000 and possible imprisonment. Most foreigners who enter the US legally are registered when they obtain visas or are admitted at ports of entry. Those who entered the US illegally can register online using Form G-325R and make an appointment to provide fingerprints. Unauthorized foreigners who register are easier to identify and deport, but DHS can arrest nonregistered foreigners encountered when conducting enforcement operations.

Migrant advocates and NGOs have developed know-your-rights cards, hotlines, and apps, and rapid response networks to alert migrant communities about the presence of ICE agents. After enforcement actions in agricultural areas, some farm workers do not show up to work until the ICE agents depart. So far, ICE-induced changes in farm worker behavior have been short-lived. However, sustained immigration enforcement actions could prompt unauthorized farm workers to move elsewhere.

Figure 9. Most Americans Want Some Unauthorized Foreigners Deported



Note: Numbers listed in yellow are the percentage of respondents for a question asking whether immigrants living in the country illegally should be deported (left) and whether undocumented immigrants with certain characteristics should be deported if they answered “Deport Some” to the previous question (right). Data were obtained from a Pew Research Center report (Noe-Bustamante and Krogstad, 2025).

There are several special cases. Immigration agents can search for unauthorized foreigners without warrants “within a reasonable distance from any external boundary of the United States,” interpreted as within 100 miles of the US border with Canada and Mexico. This makes border-area farms in Arizona, California, and Texas, as well as in northern New York and Vermont, subject to warrantless searches.

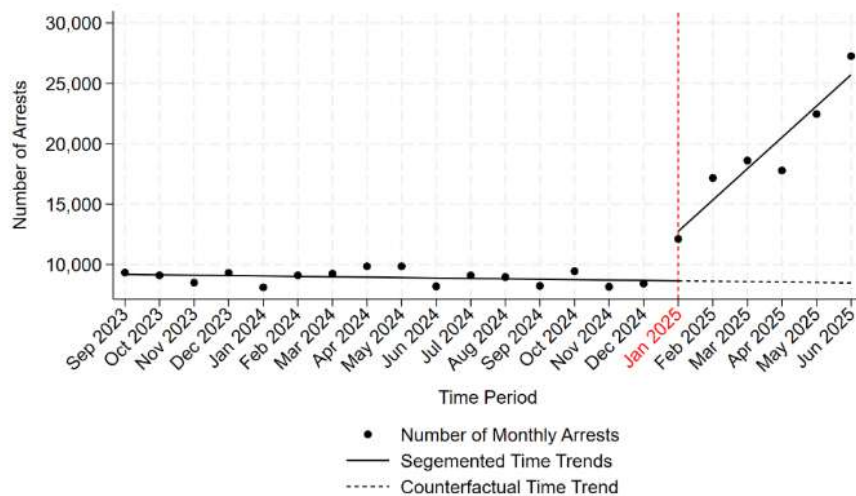
Cannabis is a Category One drug under the Federal Controlled Substances Act, and non-US citizens under 21 are not allowed to work in cannabis, even if state laws make cannabis production and possession legal. Over 360 employees of a large and vertically integrated cannabis grower, Glass House Cultivation, were arrested in July 2025 because they were not US citizens, including 11 minors, ranging between 14 and 17 years old (Lange, 2025).

Long-Term Impacts

The long-term impacts of Trump’s migration enforcement policies include increased farm labor costs and faster MMI responses of more mechanization, more migrant H-2A workers, and more imports of labor-intensive commodities from lower-wage countries (Charlton, 2025). The choice between M, M, or I depends on many factors, from technology to trade and migration policies to consumer preferences, as illustrated by the adjustments of raisin grapes, apples, and tomatoes (Rural Migration News, 2025b).

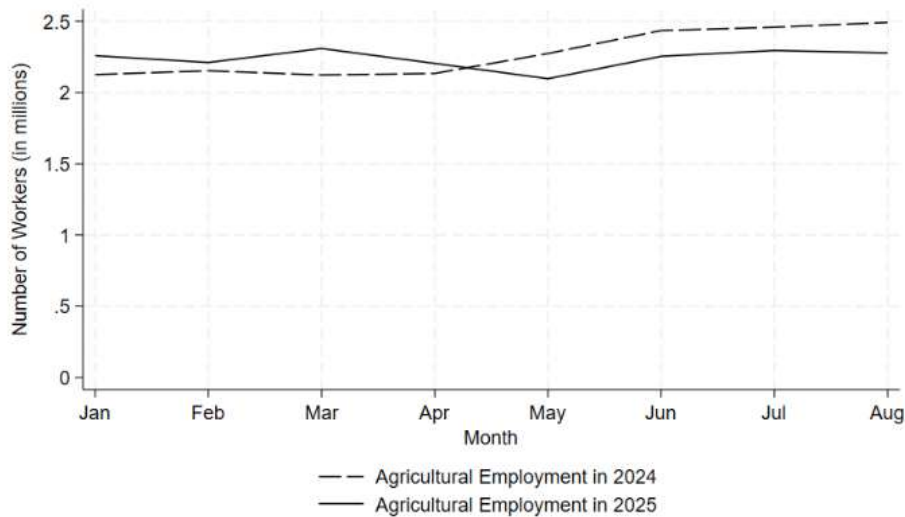
Labor-saving mechanization is the universal response to rising farm labor costs. Both public and private projects aim to develop harvesters that replace hand pickers in apples, strawberries, and other crops. Developing

Figure 10. ICE Arrests



Source: Deportation Data Project (2025).

Figure 11. Agricultural Employment, 2024–2025



Source: Current Population Survey (Flood et al., 2025).

machines to replace hand workers is difficult. Success requires a systems approach that combines:

- biology, the development of plants, vines, and trees whose produce ripens uniformly, so the machine needs to make only one pass through the field
- modified farming systems such as high-density dwarf apple trees that are planted in rows with limbs trained on wires to make the fruit more visible, so that orchards resemble vineyards (Karkee et al., 2025)
- machines or robots to detect and detach the desired fruit or vegetable quickly and without damaging trees and vines (Vougioukas et al., 2025)

The economic feasibility of robots depends on (i) their cost, (ii) efficiency (the share of marketable produce picked by the machine), and (iii) pick cycle time (the time required to pick and convey an apple or berry (Charlton et al., 2024). To compete with humans, machines must be efficient and fast, since humans are highly efficient at picking marketable produce. Current machines are not efficient or fast enough to compete with hand workers, including H-2A workers, who cost about \$30 an hour in wages, housing, and other costs. However, rising farm labor costs combined with biological, farming, and engineering advances are likely to create a situation within a decade where machines are as cheap as hand workers.

An alternative to machines is more migrant H-2A workers. The number of H-2A workers is increasing as settled farm workers age out of farm work and their US-educated children find nonfarm jobs. Employing H-2A workers means higher labor costs and free housing, transport to and from work sites, and recruitment and other expenses. However, H-2A workers are typically

younger and more productive than settled unauthorized workers in hand-harvesting jobs, and their contracts provide insurance that workers will be available when needed.

The third option is for farmers to change to less labor-intensive crops, as from labor-intensive fruits to tree nuts. Such a switch could mean that more citrus, table grapes, and berries are imported from lower-wage countries. Fresh produce imports account for 60% of US fruit consumption and 40% of vegetable consumption (Zahniser, 2023). Mexico is the source of half of US fresh fruit imports and two-thirds of US fresh vegetable imports (Astill, Ruiz, and Zahniser, 2024). Over 800,000 workers are employed on Mexican farms that export fresh produce to the US (University of California-Davis, 2025). If the US reduces fruit and vegetable imports, the employment of farm workers in the US could increase.

The US imports about \$65 billion and exports about \$35 billion worth of horticultural commodities a year, making horticultural imports about 40% of US farm imports and 20% of US farm exports (Russel and Kenner, 2021; Kenner, Jiang, and Kaufman, 2023). The leading horticultural imports include avocados and tomatoes, each worth \$3.5 billion, bananas worth \$2.5 billion, and blueberries, table grapes, and bell peppers, each worth about \$2 billion (Rural Migration News, 2025c). The fastest-growing US imports include avocados, raspberries, blueberries, and strawberries as producers abroad learn how to lengthen their seasons so that they can export almost year-round. Trump's immigration policies could increase the trade deficit for specialty crops, which could prove to be counterproductive to his tariff policy.

Conclusions

Donald Trump promised to raise tariffs and deport unauthorized foreigners, and President Trump took steps to implement both promises. The early effects of Trump's trade policy changes are more apparent than the effects of the migration policy changes; after six months, there have not been widespread farm labor or food shortages (Greenberger, 2025; Allwork, 2025).

There are many reports of fear and confusion among farm employers and workers, but few reports of crops left unharvested, wage spikes, or supermarkets without fresh fruits and vegetables. For example, according to the Current Population Survey (Flood et al., 2025), agricultural employment was stable between January 2024 and August 2025. However, those affected by Trump 2.0 migration and trade policies bemoan the uncertainty of not knowing whether migration changes are temporary or permanent, making planning difficult.

If enforcement policies ramp up gradually and farmers adjust to rising farm labor costs with more mechanization, more migrant H-2A workers, and crop changes that allow imports to increase, Trump's migration enforcement policies could be a nonevent for consumers. Labor-saving mechanization and mechanical aids, migrant guest workers who are more productive than US workers in hand-labor tasks, and imported fresh fruits and vegetables from lower-wage countries may keep the supply and prices of fresh fruits and vegetables stable.

The story may be different for individual farmers who change crops or go out of business due to higher labor costs, and for farm workers who lose their jobs and are deported. However, as with Trump 2.0 policies in other areas, there is little evidence so far of the catastrophic results that some predicted.

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