

## Growth in H-2A Workers' Employment in US Agriculture

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Many labor-intensive agricultural sectors that require hard physical work have been experiencing chronic labor scarcity. To meet the labor demand in these sectors, the US government introduced the H-2A guest-worker program in 1986 under IRCA (Luckstead and Devadoss, 2019). From 1997 to 2005, the annual growth rate of H-2A workers' employment did not increase significantly (Figure 1). However, starting from 2011, the employment of these workers accelerated at a much faster pace.

The growing need for H-2A workers arises from several factors: Undocumented farm workers who came in the 1990s are reaching retirement age or have already retired (Martin and Rutledge, 2025), the children of these workers are generally US-educated and shun farm jobs (Martin and Rutledge, 2025), the number of domestic farm workers has shrunk (Önel and Farnsworth, 2016), entry of undocumented workers from Mexico to the United States has fallen since the Great Recession in 2008 (Passel and Krogstad, 2024), workers in Mexico have shifted from farm to non-farm sector work (Charlton and Taylor, 2016), networking with Farm Labor Contracts (FLC) enables farmers to hire guest workers with less paperwork (Simnitt and Castillo, 2025),<sup>1</sup> and the fact that ICE has begun aggressively enforcing immigration laws (Martin and Rutledge, 2025). Consequently, farmers have been relying more heavily on H-2A workers, particularly since 2008.

With the Trump 2.0 immigration policy of deporting undocumented workers, the guest-worker program will likely become more important, at least in the short run, to farmers and businesses in need of low-skilled workers. This article provides a detailed analysis of the current state of the US farm workforce, with a focus on H-2A workers who are a plausible replacement for the dwindling unauthorized workforce. Specifically, the

objectives of this study are to (i) present the composition of the farm workers in the United States, (ii) discuss the states and sectors that rely on guest workers for operations, (iii) analyze the increasing trend in the guest-worker wage rates, and (iv) highlight the need for streamlining the recruitment and hiring of guest workers so that producers can readily employ these workers.

### Composition of Farm Labor

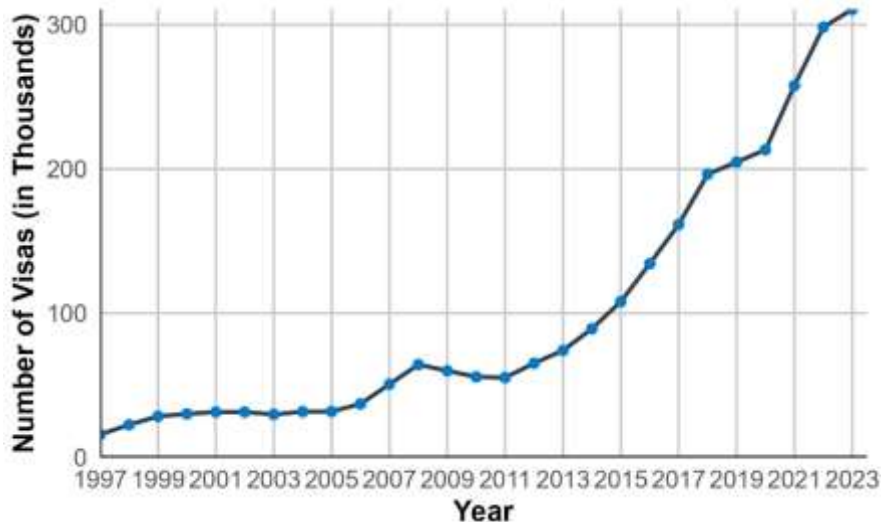
The US farm workforce comprises four groups: Native US-born citizens, foreign-born legal workers, foreign-born undocumented workers, and H-2A workers. In 2022, the direct on-farm employment in the US agricultural sector was 2.6 million workers (Kassel, 2023); of these workers, about 2 million originated from Mexico (Martin and Rutledge, 2025). Out of the 2.6 million direct on-farm employees, the number of legal farm workers is 1.48 million, which comprises US-born (820,040), US naturalized (167,960), permanent residents (198,264), and guest workers (298,336).<sup>2</sup> These numbers imply that the number of unauthorized workers in agriculture is 1.12 (= 2.6 – 1.48) million. These data indicate that US-born workers are only 31.5% of the total US farm workforce, indicating that farmers need to rely on a non-US-born workforce to complete their farm operations.

In crop production, the number of guest-worker visas issued in the United States reached more than 310,000 in 2023 (Figure 1), comprising 12.4% of crop workers, though the number of certifications by the US Department of Labor for hiring guest workers is 378,513 (Rural Migration News, 2024a). Labor-intensive crop production employs more guest workers, with H-2A workers generally accounting for 15%–20% of the workforce in these crops. As illustrated in Figure 1, the

<sup>1</sup> H-2A employment share for all agricultural production through farm labor contracts expanded from 13% in 2007 to 44% in 2020 (Castillo, Martin, and Rutledge, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> These numbers are calculated based on statistics from Rosenbloom (2022), Fung et al. (2023), Kassel (2023), Castillo (2024), and the US Department of Labor (2025b). Note that the permanent residents are based on statistics for crop workers (Castillo, 2024) and not for the agricultural sector as a whole.

Figure 1: Annual Number of H-2A Visas Issued



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

growth of guest workers underscores the importance of these workers for labor-intensive operations.

## H-2A Program

US Citizenship and Immigration Services oversees visa issuance to guest workers. These workers are employed in seasonal jobs (primarily in crop production) and work for the period authorized in the labor certification (typically between a few months and up to one year), with an average of six months (US Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2025). However, the work period may be extended one year at a time for a maximum of three years, with a new labor certification for each extension. After completing the three-year work permit, a guest worker must leave and reside outside the United States for 60 days before reapplying for work under the H-2A program. Temporary departure from the United States during their H-2A authorized period will not count toward their three-year limit. For more details about the H-2A program, see Luckstead and Devadoss (2019).

## State-Level H-2A Employment

Table 1 reports the certification of applications for H-2A workers for the top 10 states from 2008 to 2024. The top 10 states employ 71.3% of all guest workers in 2024. From 2008 to 2014, farmers in North Carolina applied for the most certifications because, right after the introduction of the H-2A program in 1986, North Carolina farmers found that hiring H-2A workers through Farm Labor Contracts (FLCs) was the most effective way to procure the needed workers (Clemens, 2013). However, starting in 2016, Florida (with 32,697 certifications) surpassed North Carolina (with 29,495 certifications). Since then, Florida has been the largest employer of guest workers because of the effective use of FLCs (Önel and Farnsworth, 2016) and established networks

in foreign countries. In addition, Florida is also a leading agricultural state with major crops such as citrus, vegetables, and fruits, which require many low-skilled workers for planting, harvesting, and processing. In 2024, Florida employed almost twice the number of H-2A workers as the second-place employer, California.

Interestingly, despite its large fruit, nut, and vegetable production, California has not been a leading employer of H-2A workers because of the availability of undocumented workers (Pew Research Center, 2016) and the regulatory barriers and costs (Wei et al., 2024). However, California's employment of these workers has expanded over the years, and it is currently the second largest employer of guest workers. Washington, with its large production of fruits (apples and stone fruits) and vegetables (onions, asparagus, and potatoes), is currently the third-largest employer of guest workers. Georgia, because of its peach, vegetable, and berry production, has always been a top-four employer of guest workers. By contrast, North Carolina moved to the fifth position in 2024 as the other states increasingly employed more guest workers. This trend in the employment of guest workers highlights the need for these workers by the larger fruit-, nut-, and vegetable-producing states.

Many of the leading states (Kentucky, Virginia, Arizona, and Idaho) that employed more H-2A workers in 2008 are not even among the top 10 employers in 2024. By contrast, Washington, Texas, Michigan, and Arkansas were not leading employers of these workers in 2008, but they were among the top 10 employers by 2024 because of greater demand for low-skilled workers in specialty crop production.

**Table 1. Top 10 H-2A Certifications by State, 2008–2024**

2008		2011		2014		2017		2020		2022		2024	
State	No.	State	No.	State	No.	State	No.	State	No.	State	No.	State	No.
NC	16,977 16.6%	NC	17,281 19.18%	NC	24,136 17.67%	FL	39,397 17.54%	FL	60,124 21.85%	FL	80,707 21.76%	FL	80,936 21.08%
GA	6,342 6.2%	LA	6,927 7.69%	FL	17,033 12.47%	NC	31,301 13.93%	CA	27,707 10.07%	CA	49,869 13.45%	CA	42,953 11.19%
LA	5,761 5.63%	GA	6,769 7.51%	WA	14,922 10.92%	WA	28,391 12.64%	WA	26,186 9.51%	WA	31,297 8.44%	WA	34,475 8.98%
KY	5,756 5.63%	FL	5,795 6.43%	GA	9,681 7.09%	GA	20,291 9.03%	GA	23,397 8.5%	GA	27,794 7.49%	GA	31,058 8.09%
FL	5,659 5.53%	WA	5,073 5.63%	CA	7,372 5.4%	CA	17,112 7.62%	NC	19,739 7.17%	NC	22,387 6.04%	NC	24,946 6.5%
CA	5,245 5.13%	KY	4,814 5.34%	KY	6,680 4.89%	LA	7,673 3.42%	LA	9,916 3.6%	MI	13,097 3.53%	TX	14,392 3.75%
NY	4,239 4.14%	VA	4,102 4.55%	LA	6,527 4.78%	KY	7,359 3.28%	NY	8,424 3.06%	LA	12,417 3.35%	MI	13,536 3.53%
VA	4,217 4.12%	NY	4,074 4.52%	VA	5,031 3.68%	NY	6,929 3.08%	TX	7,638 2.78%	TX	11,909 3.21%	LA	12,664 3.3%
AZ	4,062 3.97%	CA	2,950 3.27%	NY	4,764 3.49%	VA	4,872 2.17%	MI	7,186 2.61%	NY	9,802 2.64%	NY	10,300 2.68%
ID	3,877 3.79%	AR	2,950 3.27%	MS	3,723 2.73%	MS	4,689 2.09%	KY	6,774 2.46%	AZ	8,327 2.25%	AR	8,572 2.23%

Notes: The percentage refers to the share of guest workers' employment in that state in that year.

Source: US Department of Labor (2025).

## Sectoral-Level H-2A Employment

Guest workers are employed in many sectors of agriculture (see Figure 2). Based on 3-digit NAICS codes, crop production accounts for 45.3% of the certified H-2A workers, followed by support activities (e.g., basic irrigation tasks, equipment cleanup, general tasks to assist with farm operations) with 38.3%. Nonclassified (e.g., certifications that are classified with fewer than 3 digits for the NAICS codes or that do not fall under NAICS code 11 (the Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting sector)) sectors represent 12.3% of certified H-2A workers.

Animal production accounts for only 4.1% because most jobs in this category are year-round, and guest worker visas are not available for annual jobs.

Figure 3 decomposes the employment of guest workers in the Crop Production category. Vegetable & Melon and Fruit & Nut production employ almost 60% of guest workers because of their labor-intensive cultivational operations, such as harvesting delicate fresh produce (Vougioukas et al., 2025). For example, in Florida orange cultivation and Georgia onion production, more than 50% of the farm laborers are guest workers (Martin and Rutledge, 2025). Simnitt and Castillo (2025) report that, in Florida, 75% of H-2A workers were hired through FLCs in 2023. The larger employment in these crop productions is also observed by Castillo, Martin, and Rutledge (2024), who document a steady shift in H-2A workers from field and livestock work to fruit and

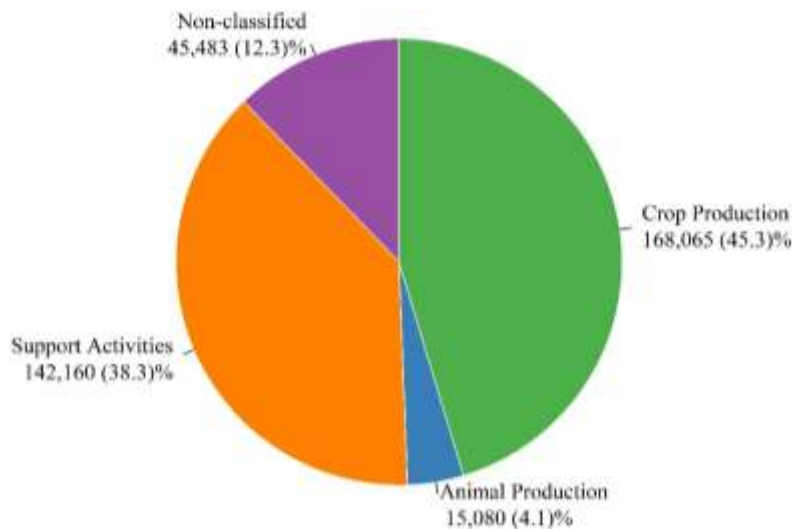
vegetable cultivation. Other crops (20.6%) and the Greenhouse, Nursery, and Floriculture sector (12.5%) also employ guest workers because of limited mechanization in their production. However, Oilseed and Grains (row crops) rely heavily on mechanical operations and use fewer guest workers.

## H-2A Wage Rates and Costs

The Department of Labor determines the H-2A wage rate—known as the adverse effect wage rate (AEWR)—in each of the 17 regions based on the previous year's wage data from field and livestock workers as surveyed by the USDA's farm labor survey (Rutledge et al., 2025). When a farm hires H-2A workers, it must pay the minimum wage specified by the AEWR to guest workers and domestic workers for similar work. Rutledge et al. (2025) show that AEWR can be above or below the non-H-2A wage rates because AEWR is set based on the previous year's field and livestock workers' wage rates from the Farm Labor Survey. Therefore, the current year's labor market conditions can cause the non-H-2A wage rate to fluctuate, which can be higher or lower than AEWR. The US Department of Agriculture announced that it would discontinue the Farm Labor Survey wage rate to set AEWR (Garza, 2025).

Table 2 presents the AEWR for the top five states that employ guest workers. The AEWRs are the highest in California and Washington and the lowest in the three southeastern states. In all five states, AEWRs have increased on average by 20% annually, which is generally higher than wage increases for workers in

**Figure 2: H-2A Workers' Employment in Various Sectors, 2022**



Source: US Department of Labor (2025).

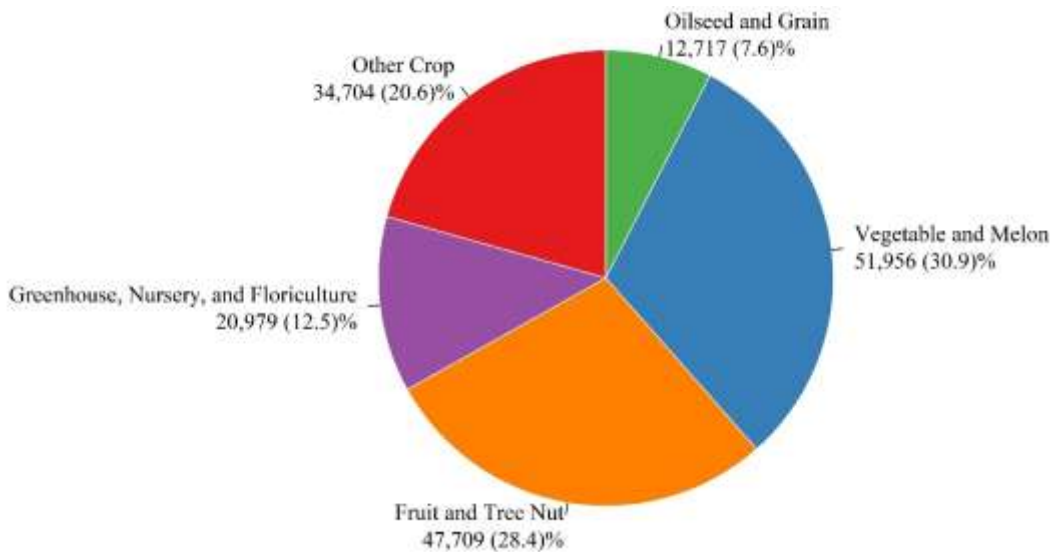
other sectors of the economy. This indicates the farm labor shortfalls (i.e., demand outpaces the available farm labor pool). AEWRs in California and Washington are generally higher (by 11%–21%) than those in the southeastern states because of the higher cost of living and greater demand for farm workers in these two states. Many farmers find that these large increases in wage rates are unsustainable, and they struggle to earn positive profits.

In addition to AEWR wage rates, employers must provide guest workers with round-trip transportation between the border/airport and the worksite, housing accommodations, transportation between the residence

and on-site work, and rides to grocery stores and religious services. These additional costs make H-2A workers more expensive than domestic or undocumented workers.

Table 3 compares the cost of employing an H-2A worker versus a native worker. Hiring an H-2A worker requires about \$2,000 for government and processing fees, transportation from the home country to the worksite, and housing in the US consulate (Castillo, Martin, and Rutledge, 2024). In addition, employers pay about \$10,000 for an H-2A worker for housing and transportation at the worksite. Employers do not have to incur these two costs for hiring domestic workers.

**Figure 3: H-2A Workers' Employment in Crop Production, 2022**



Source: US Department of Labor (2025).

**Table 2. Adverse Effect Wage Rates (\$/hr) for Top 5 H-2A Employing States**

	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2024
<b>California</b>	5.90	6.24	7.27	8.56	10.25	11.33	14.77	19.97
<b>Washington</b>	5.42	6.41	7.64	9.03	10.85	12.42	15.83	19.82
<b>Florida</b>	5.16	6.33	7.25	8.07	9.20	10.19	11.71	16.23
<b>North Carolina</b>	4.33	5.50	6.98	8.24	9.59	10.32	12.67	16.16
<b>Georgia</b>	4.29	5.66	6.72	8.07	9.11	10.00	11.71	16.08

Sources: Whittaker (2008); Federal Register (2024) and various issues.

However, employers pay a payroll tax of about \$1,625 per year for a domestic worker, but not for employing an H-2A worker. Since the wage bill is about the same for both types of workers (\$16,250 for 125 days at the rate of \$130 per day), an H-2A worker costs about \$10,375 more than a domestic worker. Guest workers are generally younger and more productive than older native and undocumented workers, particularly for farm operations that require manual work (Rural Migration News, 2024a). Consequently, if a guest worker is about 20% more efficient than a native worker (Castillo, Martin, and Rutledge, 2024), the cost difference between guest workers and domestic workers narrows.

The advantage of employing an undocumented worker is that the employer does not incur the \$12,000 in procurement, housing, and transport, and possibly the payroll tax, incurred for the H-2A worker. In addition, the wage payments for an undocumented worker are lower than those of a guestworker or native workers. This emphasizes the underlying reason for employers to hire undocumented workers over the other two types of workers. However, since most new unauthorized workers seek nonfarm jobs in big cities, the demand for guest workers continues to rise.

## Need for Improving the Guestworker Program

Two opposing views emerge in hiring H-2A workers (Önel and Farnsworth, 2016). Employers view the H-2A program as expensive and cumbersome, and they prefer a simplified, streamlined, and less expensive hiring process for these workers. By contrast, worker advocates call for stronger enforcement of recruitment, housing, and wage protections to prevent exploitation of guest workers.

From the employers' point of view, improving the operation of the H-2A program by simplifying the cumbersome paperwork and streamlining the recruitment process would help farmers hire adequate guest workers. In particular, farmers would like to lower the cost of employing H-2A workers by directly sponsoring visas, as in Canada, and not providing free housing and transportation or partial payments, as in Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom (Martin and Rutledge, 2025). Farmers also prefer guest workers to be employed year-round for several years, so that a stable labor supply is available for operations such as dairy farms. Worker advocates will not positively view many of the employers' preferences for hiring guest workers, particularly lower wage rates and not paying for housing and transportation.

## Conclusions and Implications

Labor-intensive agriculture has experienced chronic labor scarcity, and many crops go unharvested (Devadoss and Luckstead, 2008; Luckstead and Devadoss, 2019). The immigration policies of Trump 2.0 are exacerbating this labor scarcity problem. If the Trump administration continues to deport undocumented farm workers, labor-intensive agriculture could face a serious labor shortfall, and, in the short run, farmers will likely have to rely on H-2A workers to complete their operations. President Trump himself asserted that he wants to help farmers by slowing down deportation (Madhani and Spagat, 2025), but the actions of ICE and other administration officials in June and July 2025 are counter to this sentiment (Nichols, 2025; Nobles, 2025). Furthermore, the guest-worker program is well-suited to the Trump administration's immigration policy of deporting undocumented workers and bringing them back legally to work in the United States (Gamboa, 2025).

**Table 3. Cost of Employing an H-2A Versus a Domestic Worker**

Expenses	H-2A Worker	Domestic Worker
Cost of procuring	\$2,000	\$0
Housing and transport at worksite	\$10,000	\$0
Wage bill for 125 days at \$130/day	\$16,250	\$16,250
Payroll taxes (at the rate of 10%)	\$0	\$1,625
Total cost	\$28,250	\$17,875

Source: Rural Migration News (2024b); Castillo, Martin, and Rutledge (2024).

With AEWG wages growing at about 20% a year and H-2A workers becoming unaffordable, the deportation of undocumented workers could increase labor costs. This higher cost could be passed on to consumers who are already beset with food price inflation. If fresh produce prices keep increasing sharply, more fruit and vegetable imports are likely (Naing, Devadoss, and Hi, Forthcoming).

A potentially long-term outcome is that farmers will need to mechanize (Bampasidou and Salassi, 2019; Önel et al., 2025) and adopt labor-saving technologies for weeding, pruning, and harvesting (Vougioukas et al., 2025; Karkee et al., 2025) to reduce labor costs (Charlton et al., 2025). While artificial intelligence may

increase the rate of innovation in these areas (Önel et al., 2025), if wages become too high without any new labor-saving technology, farmers may have to switch from more labor-intensive crops to less labor-intensive crops to reduce labor costs (Rural Migration News, 2024b).

Though immigration policy is a national issue, farmers and growers are heavily impacted by policies that restrict migrant workers. Therefore, immigration policy and the need for immigrant farm labor will continue to be at the forefront of public debate.

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