

6/6/91

## FARM WORKER STUDIES

Don Villarejo  
Panel Chairperson  
California Institute for Rural Studies  
Davis, California

There has been a substantial increase in the production of labor intensive crops in the United States over the past 20 years. In fresh market vegetables, the U.S. produces about 75 percent more in tonnage than 20 years ago on an annual basis. In the fruit crops, we are producing about 20 percent more than 20 years ago on a tonnage basis. We are producing 35 to 40 percent more than 20 years ago in horticultural crops.

We must consider, in determining whether or not these increases in crop production translate into increases in labor demand, if there have been significant improvements in agricultural technology which result in substantial increases in the volume of production as well as improvements in yield and increases in acreage.

Although there have been significant developments such as field packing in vegetables and the second generation tomato harvester, most of the technological improvements in labor-intensive crops took place prior to 1970. Accompanying the increases in the production of labor-intensive commodities has been an increase in labor demand. In addition, over the past 50 years, the share of all farm work in California performed by farmers and unpaid family members has decreased by a factor of two. It is estimated that today farmers and unpaid family members contribute only about 20 percent of all farm work in the state.

Therefore we think that are associated with

Until relatively recently, most of the information about farm workers was derived from reports generated by employers such as administrative data similar to unemployment insurance reports produced by the state, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's quarterly survey of farm employment, the Commerce Department's census of agriculture, or private surveys such as the Farm Bureau's *Farm Employer Labor Service Survey*. These data are invariably reports by employers of what they perceive to be either the number of jobs, the number of employees, wages, or hours. There is relatively little direct information about the workers themselves. The anticipation of significant labor shortages expected as a result of the enactment

of the Immigration Reform and Control Act indicated that we did not have the information that we really needed to understand the impact of immigration reform on agriculture.

Among the very few direct measures <sup>of the members and demographics in</sup> ~~created in past decades~~ is the hired farm workers survey conducted every other year in conjunction with the current population survey. According to the "Americans in Agriculture: Portraits of Diversity" in *The 1990 Yearbook of Agriculture*, published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, in 1987 Hispanics made up just 44 percent of all hired farm workers in the Pacific region. That is from the perspective of the only systematic effort made over the decades to get some kind of measure of the hired work force.

The panel of scholars assembled today at this symposium represents a fundamentally different approach to looking at the hired farm work force of the United States and California. What is novel about them is that they spend most of their time talking to farm workers.

## Farm Worker Studies

Over the past twenty years the U.S. has experienced very substantial increases in the volume of production of labor-intensive crops. In the major fresh market vegetables, for example, U.S.-produced tonnage increased by 73%. In fruit production the increase of tonnage amounted to 20%. And in horticultural crop production the increase was probably between 35% and 40%.

*Factors in labor demand: (1) technological improvement, (2) yield, (3) acreage*  
Corresponding to these increases in the physical volume of production there have been substantial increases in labor demand, sometimes in an unexpected fashion. For example, the 1987 Census of Agriculture reported that the total of direct and contract labor expenses of horticultural crop farms exceeded the total for vegetable and melon farms by 42%.

California, of course, is the nation's leading producer of fruit, vegetable and horticultural crops. What is less well known is that the fraction of all farm work performed by hired workers in California has continuously increased throughout the past forty years. Correspondingly, the fraction of all farm work that is performed by farmers and unpaid family members has steadily declined. EDD estimates indicate that today 4 out of 5 hours of work on our state's farms are performed by hired workers.

Until fairly recently, most of our information about farm employees was derived from reports from employers. Administrative data gathered by State and Federal agencies, USDA's quarterly survey of farm employment, wages and hours reported in Farm Labor, the Commerce Department's Census of Agriculture, as well as private surveys of farm businesses (such as the FELS wage & benefits survey) rely exclusively on information supplied by employers. Surprisingly, these data sets are mutually inconsistent, a fact fully illuminated by Phil Martin in his book Harvest of Confusion. Equally important, the information gathered in this fashion tends to focus on matters of greatest concern to employers: numbers of workers, numbers of jobs, wages and benefits, and total labor expense.

The only systematic effort to rely upon information obtained directly from employees, USDA's Hired Farm Work Force, was essentially an adjunct to the CPS survey of the Bureau of the Census and was conducted every other year, in December. The 1987 HFWF survey describes farm employees in the following manner. (Quote from 1990 Yearbook of Agriculture) The generally unsatisfactory results of this survey has led to a recommendation that it be abandoned.

During the late 1970's and early 1980's a new generation of scholars emerged who developed a fundamentally new approach to the study of the hired farm work force. By sharpening their survey methodology or using an ethnographic approach these scholars have been able to provide us with a more accurate profile of hired farm workers.

We are fortunate today to have been able to assemble a number of the best of these young scholars. The term "young" is certainly accurate since all are younger than I by a considerable margin. So without further delay let us proceed.

*Relaborization  
of Ag.*

## Post-Panel Remarks

Several weeks ago I participated in a meeting of various people who are interested in farm family occupational safety and health, a subject that has gained increased attention in the past few years. An insurance industry leader, whose firm writes Workers Compensation insurance policies in agriculture, suggested that we should initiate an effort to add instruction in farm safety to our elementary school curriculum in agricultural areas of California. The specific purpose he had in mind was reaching future farm employees as early as possible with farm safety information. Now one can question whether this approach to worker safety is effective or not but, in the present context, it was of some interest to me that he had given no consideration to whether or not a significant fraction of future California farm employees will be receiving their early childhood education in our state. That is, the possibility that many, if not most, future farm employees might be educated outside of the U.S. was not considered.

What are the main observations. Internationalization of the farm employee labor force. — Why only

IRCA was the stimulus for labor market studies

Alvarado — immigration continues without interruption — fraudulent documents  
no labor shortage in any crop in S.T. Valley — over-abundant supply of workers  
wages have not increased in recent years — real earnings have declined  
children of F.W. will not be working in ag.

Galbraith —  $\frac{2}{3}$  under 35;  $\frac{2}{3}$  are foreign born;  $\frac{1}{5}$  of foreign born are voluntarily undocumented  
65% are Spanish speakers; only  $\frac{1}{5}$  of SAS are single males  
virtually all adults are working;  $\frac{1}{2}$  SAS earn less than \$7,500 for total of 34 weeks of work (all jobs)  
fewer than  $\frac{1}{5}$  receive need based social services  
only 24% have ~~health~~ health insurance

Kissam — Parkies study; only 6% of current F.W. plan to leave F.W. for other jobs — upstream mode of intl. labor market network  
children of current F.W. do not want to continue to do farm work  
highest correlation of ability to leave farm work is English skill  
Crossers migrants are newest arrivals — strong evidence of labor surplus in peak season unemployment

Ramstein — ① Calif. F.W. about 95% Mexican born ② Nature of migration from Mexico is changing — indigenous workers  
② U.S. born children of F.W. do not go into F.W. ③ Excess supply of F.W. — decline of wages — decline of union influence  
③ Spanish is main language ④ More settlement as settlement is less viable

Palmer — re-habilitation — new Mexican communities  
stabilization of labor force