‘It’s getting really difficult to find help anymore’

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“It’s getting really difficult to find help anymore,” said Steinacher, whose 172½ acres of fig trees normally produce about 100,000 boxes of fresh figs each year for customers such as Whole Foods Market.

“This year I’ve started rethinking that maybe it’s time to start planning on doing something different,” he said. “I don’t want to. … But with this problem with labor, we may be looking at planting nuts,” which can be harvested using specialized machinery and only a small crew.

Tim Hearden/Capital Press

Pickers at Maywood Farms in Corning, Calif., load bins of figs onto a flatbed trailer to be packed into boxes. Grower Bob Steinacher has considered converting some of his orchards to pistachios, which are mechanically harvested, because of a worsening labor shortage.

Decrease in workers

A worsening shortage of farmworkers in recent years has hurt growers’ ability in California and across the nation to produce labor-intensive fruits and vegetables. While some growers try creative ways to attract workers in the short term, in the long term the trend may force them to mechanize their operations or switch to crops that can be mechanically harvested.

Labor shortages cost U.S. agriculture $3.1 billion a year, according to a recent report by the Partnership for a New American Economy, a bipartisan group of mayors and business leaders. That missed production leads to a $2.8 billion decrease in spending on nonfarm services such as transportation, manufacturing and irrigation annually, according to the report.

Between 2002 and 2014, the number of full-time equivalent field and crop workers nationwide has dropped by at least 146,000 people, or more than 20 percent, the report states. More than 58 percent of that loss has been in California, where the ag work force shrank by about 85,000 people.

Though California’s four-year drought has been a factor, most of the decline took place before the drought began, according to the report.

Reason for shortage

Several factors have caused the shortages, including a tighter U.S. border and fewer Mexican workers trying to find work in the U.S.

Last year alone, about 229,000 Mexican citizens were apprehended by the U.S. Border Patrol, according to the Pew Research Center. Foreign-born workers must show proof that they are in the U.S. legally in order to be hired, immigration officials say. Many workers skirt the law by providing falsified documents. If illegal workers are caught, their employers are held liable, officials say.

Employers must be cautious about pushing workers for documents without trampling on their rights, said Dale Moore, the American Farm Bureau Federation’s executive director of public policy.

“If they press too hard ... they run the risk of violating other laws,” Moore said. “It’s a real Catch-22 situation that farmers and ranchers are facing.”

Besides avoiding the risk of being stopped at the U.S. border, more Mexicans are choosing to stay home rather than go north for agricultural work. They say Mexico’s economy is improving and the risk of injury from drug cartels operating along the border make the risk higher than the reward of work in the U.S.

“It’s getting worse year by year,” said Adin Hester, president of the Olive Growers Council of California, said of the shortage. “It connects itself to the problems with water. So much of this land is being just idled that all the Mexicans are going back to Mexico, and the economy has improved to the point now that some of them who go down there don’t come back.”

U.S.-born workers aren’t filling labor gaps on farms, either. From 2002 to 2014, the increase in U.S.-born workers offset less than 3 percent of the overall decline in agricultural workers caused by foreign-born laborers, according to the Partnership’s report.

Farms also face increased competition from the construction and hospitality industries for workers, said Laura Brown, director of government relations for California Citrus Mutual, a growers’ group.

For citrus growers, the labor crunch has been just as severe this year as it was in 2014, even though thousands of acres of citrus crops were taken out of production because of the drought, Brown said.

“We’re seeing fewer individuals coming to California looking for work, so therefore the labor force has been reduced from the get-go,” Brown said. “Then with the ongoing competition from construction and hospitality, agriculture is consistently paying above the minimum wage (to bring in workers).

“I think what we see is that there was such a strong labor force from the Bracero program, and a lot of those employees have been able to make lives in California and their children have been able to go to schools here and get jobs outside of what their parents were doing,” she said. “That’s the American dream. We’re just seeing that we’re not getting a fresh flush of immigration right now, therefore our pool of labor is slowly diminishing.”

Under the Bracero program, Mexican citizens were allowed to enter the U.S. from 1942 to 1964 to do farmwork.

Efforts to boost the legal labor force through comprehensive immigration reform have languished for years in Congress, even though a recent poll by the Pew Research Center found that 72 percent of Americans favor allowing illegal immigrants now living in the country to stay if they meet certain requirements.

Attracting workers

To compete for the seasonal laborers who are presumed to be here legally, many farms are not only raising wages but are also offering creative benefits.

For instance, some farms in the San Joaquin Valley offer scholarship programs for workers’ children, hire in-house cooks to prepare meals and employ nurses or bring in mobile clinics to take care of workers’ health needs, Brown said.

In other cases, individual farmers have gotten together to hire a pool of workers so they can be assured of steadier work, the Farm Bureau’s Moore said.

“They’re constantly trying to find ways to attract more workers,” Moore said. “I know a number of them who are working with job placement agencies and colleges and universities, trying to find folks who are willing to do that kind of work and do it when the work is needed to be done.

“It’s like a full-time job getting the workers in when you need them,” he said.

At best, these efforts may only be temporary fixes. Today’s field and crop workers are rapidly aging, with 27.1 percent being 45 or older in the 2008-2012 period, according to the Partnership study. Only 11.5 percent of foreign farmworkers from 2008 to 2012 were new immigrants, having arrived in the United States within the previous five years, the group found.

Some farmers who can’t find enough workers using incentives turn to the federal H-2A visa program. It allows foreign workers to enter the U.S. temporarily and return to their home country after the work is over. While it helps fill the gap left by the labor shortage, supporters and critics both say it is costly, cumbersome and time-consuming.

Use of technology

A long-term labor solution for many farms is mechanization, either with the crop they’re currently producing or with a different crop.

Growers of many commodities that have traditionally been picked by hand are attempting to integrate technology, with mixed results.

• Apple growers have been adopting motorized picking platforms that allow fewer pickers to do more work in less time, and engineers are working on fully mechanized apple-picking machines.

• Many blueberry growers and winegrape growers have switched to automated harvesters, allowing them to harvest their crops with a fraction of the number of workers they formerly required.

• The raisin harvest, which has required as many as 60,000 workers during its six-week peak, is rapidly being mechanized, according to a July newsletter by migration experts at the University of California-Davis.

In 2014, one-quarter of California’s 185,000 acres of raisin-type grapes were harvested by machine, according to the UC-Davis report.

• The $2 billion strawberry industry, which normally employs 1.5 workers per acre, is slowly moving toward the $100,000 Agrobot for harvest, the UC experts report. The use of raised, hydroponic beds to grow berries could further speed mechanization, they predict.

The California Strawberry Commission is also exploring the potential for various engineering and technological solutions, including machinery to move empty and full boxes for harvesters, planting machines and de-capping machines for processing berries, spokeswoman Carolyn O’Donnell said.

• Switching to mechanical harvests often requires a farmer to replace old oil olive trees with new plantings in narrow canopy hedgerow systems, which may be too costly for growers that are now struggling to make ends meet, Hester said.

Switching crops

For some, the answer has been to switch crops entirely. This year’s 18,000 bearing acres for table olives in California is down significantly from the peak of 38,000 acres about a decade ago, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service.

“If we don’t find a solution (to the farmworker shortage) legally, I think over time the industries and technologies are going to come to an intersection,” Citrus Mutual’s Brown said. “You’re going to see more crops in California that are machine-harvested, and crops such as citrus, strawberries and table grapes won’t have such a large place in the California economy.”

For Steinacher, the fig grower, the labor shortage has long precluded any serious thought of expanding his operation. Now he’s having trouble finding enough knowledgeable workers to pick the crop that he has, he said.

His ground is too rough for some nuts, although he does grow some walnuts. But he’s considering planting pistachios, which are harvested with shakers and catch basins much like prunes.

“I’m really concerned that my kids don’t have a future here growing figs because of the lack of labor,” Steinacher said, adding that a better immigration policy is needed to bring in more foreign workers because most Americans don’t want to work in fields. “With the borders shut down, we can’t get people who will just show up.

“I don’t know what the future is going to hold,” he said. “Water is an issue, but this labor thing is right now for us.”

Case illustrates that conflicts will arise as wolves return to the state

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Tracy said in an interview that Rasmussen has agreed to accept the deal. Rasmussen’s attorney, Roger Sandberg of Pullman, declined to comment, saying he will wait for a judge to approve the settlement.

“I recognize that the shooting of a wolf generates strong emotions in some people, and depending on the person, those emotions run either in support of such an act or opposed to such an act,” Tracy said in a written statement.

Tracy said that he received emails from as far away as Australia urging stiff prosecution. Tracy said charging Rasmussen with a felony wasn’t an option available to him. Also, Rasmussen couldn’t have merely called Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife officials to come and tranquilize the animal because the department doesn’t do that, Tracy said.

Other people, according to Tracy, argued that Whitman County is not a wilderness. It has long-settled towns and farms, where wolves are no more appropriate than in Bellevue, and that it has many children who raise animals.

“They ask whether the kids should have to pick up a Winchester on the way to the barn every morning or evening to keep themselves and their animals safe,” stated Tracy, who added that the question was “worth asking.”

AP File photo

Conservation Northwest Executive Director Mitch Friedman said he was disappointed in Tracy’s handling of the case and for questioning whether wolves should be in Whitman County. He said there was nothing in reports about the incident to suggest the wolf was a danger to anyone.

“It (the penalty) is too low. It sends a signal, but I’m more upset about his statement that wolves can’t exist in Whitman County,” Friedman said. “He’s making a decision for us, and that’s not his job.”

Washington Cattlemen’s Association Executive Vice President Jack Field said the case illustrates that conflicts will arise as wolves return to the state.

“I support the process and the fact that the prosecutor made his best decision based on the facts that he had,” Field said.

In the interview, Tracy said the public interest and public passion in the case didn’t influence his decision, but it was one reason the case took 11 months to resolve.

“Their impact was to cause me to be very careful,” he said. “I thought about this case and how to resolve it for quite some time.”

Tracy said he concluded that giving Rasmussen the option of paying what Tracy estimated were the administrative costs for handing the case was justified for several reasons, and not a case of yielding to local sentiment.

“I don’t believe this decision is an outlier from the rest of the state,” he said.

Tracy noted that Rasmussen had no previous hunting or wildlife violations, called 911 to report the shooting and had forfeited his rifle to the WDFW.

Plus, Rasmussen was confronted with a “new and surprising situation” and that “wolves have not been seen here for a hundred years,” Tracy said.

The prosecutor acknowledged the unusual circumstances of the case, but noted that defendants accused of hunting misdemeanors who have no prior offenses are commonly offered such resolutions.

Also, Rasmussen could have been expected to argue the wolf was a public danger and also that denying his ability to protect his home was an unconstitutional taking of property, Tracy said.

The defense’s arguments put in doubt whether the prosecution could have won a conviction, Tracy said.

‘El Nino is never a guarantee of a certain set of outcomes’

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While a strong El Nino is reliably associated with warmer weather, the impact on precipitation is less clear — the event generally indicates drier conditions in Oregon, but that’s not inevitable, he said.

“El Nino is never a guarantee of a certain set of outcomes,” Di Liberto said. “Weather can be chaotic.”

Areas of low pressure tend to usher in storms toward the southern West Coast during El Nino winters, but it’s tough to say where this “anomaly” will be strongest, so the Northwest may also be affected, he said.

With higher temperatures, though, the precipitation isn’t as likely to come in the form of snow, he said.

Aside from El Nino, another significant weather pattern to watch is the Arctic Oscillation, which determines whether storms around the North Pole will spread out and impact lower latitudes.

This trend may either enhance or conflict with the effects of El Nino, though it’s too early to tell at this point, Di Liberto said. “Those are the type of patterns we don’t have a ton of predictability with.”

Soil moisture is another consideration heading into winter, as the ground must be saturated before snowpacks become available in the form of runoff, said Scott Oviatt, Oregon snow survey supervisor for the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service.

“We’re worried that we’re going into the water year with a deficit,” he said, noting that some regions in Oregon have experienced several years of insufficient moisture. “That has made the situation worse and it’s why we’ve been so susceptible to wildfire this year.”

Despite the “exhausted” soils, it wouldn’t be desirable for Oregon to see “high intensity” precipitation that would lead to flash flooding, he said.

That risk is particularly acute in areas that have suffered from wildfires, since ash impedes the soil’s ability to take on water, Oviatt said.

It’s preferable for the state to encounter a progression of “low-intensity” storms that will replenish moisture without overwhelming the soil, he said.

Low stream flows across Oregon in 2015 caused water regulators to shut off irrigation for junior water rights holders weeks ahead of normal, said Diana Enright, spokesperson for the Oregon Water Resources Department.

Water calls also went back further in time in terms of priority date — the John Day River, for example, was regulated back to 1876, while Fifteenmile Creek in the Hood River area was regulated back to 1861, according to OWRD. In other words, irrigators with more recent priority dates had irrigation shut off.

It was also unusual that irrigators in the Northwest corner of Oregon were subject to water calls, Enright said. In Polk County, for example, Rickreall Creek was regulated back to 1940 and the Luckiamute River was regulated to 1964.

Longtime area residents said they hadn’t experienced such shortages before, Enright said. “We don’t usually regulate in those areas.”

With the possibility that more precipitation will fall as rain rather than snow, the management of reservoirs may need to be reconsidered, said Snell of the Oregon Water Resources Congress.

Water is traditionally released during winter to ensure adequate flood control, but if recent conditions are the “new normal,” those requirements must be balanced against the need for adequate water during summer, she said.

If there is an upside to the drought, it’s that more people are thinking about the need for water supply management and development, Snell said. “It’s an eye-opener for folks.”