

H-2A to increase as immigration stalls

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

WENATCHEE, Wash. — With immigration reform dead in the U.S. House, agricultural employers throughout the Pacific Northwest and beyond will continue to turn to the H-2A guestworker visa program to meet their labor needs, a labor association leader says.

Rapid growth of H-2A workers in landscape nurseries, berries and tree fruit is likely in Oregon and in tree fruit and hops in Idaho as annual growth slows from 40 to 15 percent in Washington where use already is high, said Dan Fazio, director of the Washington Farm Labor Association in Olympia.

The federal H-2A program allows agricultural employers to hire foreign guestworkers on temporary work visas to fill seasonal jobs. Employers must show a shortage of U.S. workers in the area and provide housing, transportation and a minimum wage.

Fazio talked with apple packers interested in the program in Wenatchee, Nov. 11. H-2A has been used mostly in harvest but it's increasing in packing, he said.

The association, known as WAFLA, hires and provides about 80 percent of the 11,000 H-2A workers used in the state. That's up from 9,000 last



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

A Custom Orchards crew harvests Honeycrisp apples on the south edge of Brewster, Wash., Aug. 31. Growers have increasingly turned to H-2A visa foreign guestworkers for this work in recent years because of labor shortages.

year and 814 in 2006. Washington ranked fourth behind Georgia, Florida and North Carolina in H-2A workers in 2014. North Carolina topped the list at 14,502, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

"The domestic labor force continues to dwindle. 2015 felt a lot like 2006 where people were not picking lower value fruit," Fazio said. "I look for that trend to continue. We're competing with the construction industry which is

still the highest paid seasonal work around."

The Obama administration should make the legal H-2A program work better but instead has made it more difficult, Fazio said.

The president is more interested in pursuing his executive order of questionable authority" to grant worker status to 5 million illegal immigrants in the U.S. than he is in making the legal H-2A program work more smoothly, Fazio said.

The 5th U.S. Circuit Court

of Appeals blocked the administration's executive order Nov. 9. The administration says it will appeal to the Supreme Court. A week earlier, new House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., said he will not work with Obama on immigration reform because the president can't be trusted on the issue since he went around Congress in issuing his executive order.

WAFLA plans to open offices in Oregon and Idaho and sees growth for H-2A in hops in Idaho and Washington,

WAFLA workforce summits set

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ELLENSBURG, Wash. — Agricultural employers may learn more about the Washington Farm Labor Association's H-2A visa foreign guestworker program at the association's annual Workforce Summit at Central Washington University, Jan. 28.

H-2A will be introduced to employers considering it for the first time. Those who have used it will share experiences. Housing, transportation, recruitment, wages and other aspects of the program will be explained.

Those planning to attend should register by the end of December at www.wafla.org.

WAFLA also will hold the summit in Canby, Ore., Jan. 26, at a location yet to be determined.

The association will hold its annual Labor Conference at CWU in Ellensburg, Feb. 18. Immigration, the Affordable Care Act, rest break pay for piece rate workers and proposals to increase the state's minimum wage will be discussed.

Sexual harassment will be discussed. Starting Jan. 1, WAFLA is offering a sexual harassment hotline to growers for as little as \$250 per year. It insulates growers from being accused of doing nothing about complaints, said Dan Fazio, WAFLA director.

Fazio said.

Oregon used about 250 H-2A workers this year and likely will increase by 100 next year, particularly among vegetable growers in the Canby area, said Montse Walker, WAFLA H-2A program manager.

Idaho had 30 workers on one contract this year and probably will have three or four contract for about 50 workers total next year, Walker said.

"We did consulting work in Michigan and California this

year and helped bring 1,000 workers to Michigan for tree fruit," Fazio said.

About 100 individual growers hire H-2A workers through WAFLA in Washington, Fazio said. The smallest contract is for two workers and the largest is for more than 1,500. There are several in the 500-worker range and most are 100 or fewer. Zirkle Fruit Co., Selah, operates its own program and had 1,964 H-2A workers in 2014, according to USDOL.



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LaCrosse FFA Team Wins National Competition





Britte Harder, Abigail McGregor and Jason Wigen make their winning presentation Oct. 30 at the National FFA Convention in Louisville, Kentucky. The team bested 31 other state champion teams in the Marketing Plan Competition. Photo courtesy of LaCrosse, WA, FFA

LACROSSE, Wash. — A team of three LaCrosse High School students has been named national champions at the 88th National FFA Convention in Louisville, Ky.

The FFA Marketing Plan Competition team was comprised of juniors Britte Harder and Abigail McGregor and 2015 graduate Jason Wigen.

The rural Whitman County school has about 30 students.

After winning their district competition last year, the trio of students defeated 22 other Washington high school teams at last spring's state convention in Pullman.

Following the win at WSU, the team spent the summer and fall polishing its plan and presentation skills in preparation for the national convention, which annually draws over 60,000 attendees.

The team prepared and presented a plan designed for Dixon Land and Livestock JV to improve and grow its annual Club Calf Sale in Pomeroy, Wash. They were able to apply this real world experience in conjunction with direction from their FFA chapter advisor and teacher, Lisa Baser, to garner the national award.

In Louisville, the LaCrosse team competed against 31 other state champions. Each round of the competition included a team presentation followed by a question-and-answer session with a panel of expert judges.

Following the initial round, the pool was narrowed to 18 state teams. Representing Washington state FFA, LaCrosse advanced to the final round against teams from Georgia, Michigan and Nebraska.

Although McGregor, Harder and Wigen presented at 5:30 a.m. local time on Oct. 30, they didn't find out until the awards banquet later that night they had won the competition.

As national champions, each student was awarded a \$1,000 cash prize from Bunge North America; a St. Louis-based agricultural commodities marketing company.

Following the completion of her high school studies, Britte Harder plans to become a commercial airline pilot, and Abby McGregor plans to study architecture. Jason Wigen is currently serving as state FFA reporter and will attend Washington State University in the fall to study crop sciences.

This is the second team that Baser has taken to the National FFA Marketing Plan Competition. In 2008, she coached the team from Pomeroy High School, where her husband was the FFA adviser at the time.



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