

Study: Fewer farmworkers migrate, aggravating labor shortage



Workers prune apple trees in East Wenatchee, Wash. A new study has found that many farmworkers are less likely to migrate from job to job.

Several factors contribute to reduced migration among workers

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

The agricultural labor shortage has less to do with the shrinking population of farmworkers than with its changing work habits, a new economic study found.

Since the late 1990s, the proportion of farmworkers who regularly migrate from place to place has decreased from about 50 percent to less than 20 percent, said Maoyong Fan, an economist at Ball State University and the study's lead author.

"The key problem is not that we have an absolute smaller number of farmworkers, the key problem is they're not willing to move to take multiple jobs," Fan said.

While the farmworker

population dropped about 9 percent during the time period Fan studied, more than 1 million remain in the industry.

"It's not a dramatic decrease that would cause this labor shortage," he said.

The percentage of migrating farmworkers remained stable through the 1990s but has declined significantly since the turn of the century, partly due to more vigorous border enforcement since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Fan said.

"I was shocked by the magnitude of the decrease," he said.

Farmworkers are less likely to travel between the U.S. and Mexico due to stricter enforcement, but that's not the only reason for the shift, Fan said.

Mexico's birthrate has fallen, so fewer young workers are available, while the country's economic situation has improved, reducing many citizens' willingness to migrate, he said.

Immigrants already living in the U.S. have formed stronger social networks, so they can help new arrivals find work without using agriculture as a "stepping stone," he said. "They can find jobs in the city. Agriculture is bypassed now."

The study also noted changes in the demographic makeup of farmworkers. They're now more likely to be older, more experienced and living in homes with their immediate families, none of which contributes to their willingness to migrate.

Dan Fazio, executive director of the WAFLA agricultural labor organization, said the study is "absolutely consistent with what we've seen in the field."

Many farmworkers traditionally earned enough money during the growing season to return to Mexico for the winter, Fazio said.

As the border became more difficult to cross, they've stayed within the U.S. and acquired year-round jobs

to sustain themselves, he said. "Now seasonal agricultural work is a lot less attractive."

Farmers have responded by growing multiple crops that are harvested in succession, allowing them to retain farmworkers for longer periods, Fazio said.

They've further stretched out the growing season with fruit cultivars that ripen earlier and later than the normal season, he said.

Fan said it's probable that the phenomenon of farmers retaining workers has contributed to their reduced willingness to migrate.

While an economist's typical solution to labor shortages in an industry is higher wages, growers would argue that profits are too thin to make such increases possible, he said.

Expanding the H-2A guest worker visa program would alleviate the tight labor market, Fan said. "If we can make that easier, it's a better solution for this labor shortage problem."

Idaho delivers more equipment to five Rangeland Fire Protection Associations

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — The Idaho Department of Lands delivered four wildland firefighting engines and five "slip-in" units to five of the state's six Rangeland Fire Protection Associations April 25.

The type 6 engines are light, mobile four-wheel drive vehicles that can hold 300 gallons of water.

The slip-in units can be placed on a pickup or flatbed truck and consist of a water tank, pump and hose reel and hold 75-300 gallons of water.

Idaho's RFPAs were formed in 2013 by ranchers, who are trained by the federal Bureau of Land Management and assist federal and state agencies in fighting wildfires.

RFPA members use their own equipment, but the addition of these new engines and slip-in units will significantly boost their capacity, said Castleford rancher Michael Guerry, chairman of the Three Creek RFPA.

"A well-equipped engine like this will be very beneficial to us from a standpoint of early response," he said shortly before RFPA members were given a basic overview of the equipment by IDL mechanics and operators.

IDL previously delivered four large water hauling tenders to two RFPAs.

IDL purchased some of the equipment through with state general fund dollars and grant funding from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and acquired some through the Federal Excess Personal Property program.

Julia Sullens, the IDL's liaison to the RFPAs, said they have greatly benefited Idaho's wildland firefighting capabilities, in part because they know the land and also because they can more quickly respond to many fires.

"The RFPAs add incredible capacity and benefit to the



Rancher Michael Guerry explains to the media April 25 how wildland firefighting equipment provided by the Idaho Department of Lands will benefit the state's Rangeland Fire Protection Associations.

wildland firefighting force in Idaho and we are very pleased to be able to add to their capacity today by providing this equipment," she said.

Idaho's six RFPAs have around 300 members, mostly ranchers. Together, they provide primary protection on 1.4 million acres of private land and secondary protection on 6.3 million acres of federal and state land.

They assisted the state and BLM on 31 wildland fires last year and in many cases provided quick, initial attack,

Sullens said.

"The response time is the key and where we are out there already, we can get there so much faster and stop them before they get big," said rancher David Rutan, a member of the Owyhee RFPA.

Guerry said the RFPAs have been a blessing to many ranchers, including himself, who were almost burned out dealing with the large number of wildland fires in southwestern Idaho, which has had more repeat fires in the past four decades than any other region in the country.

"It's made my operation feasible," Guerry said of the association's effectiveness.

Sullens said ranchers fighting fires is not a new concept because they have been doing that for generations.

"Forming an association where they are working collaboratively together with the IDL and BLM, with the same training and same gear, that's the new concept in Idaho," she said. "They know the ground in and out and they provide valuable information. The knowledge that they have is a huge benefit."



Oregon State University wheat breeder Robert Zemetra, right, makes a point during an Oregon Wheat Commission tour April 25.

Wheat commission considers budget, research funding

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

Decreasing wheat acreage over the past couple years poses some complications for the Oregon Wheat Commission as it puts together its 2016-17 budget.

Meeting at Oregon State University's Hyslop Farm on April 25, commission members approved a proposed budget that attempts to balance research funding requests with crop assessment projections. The commission will adopt a final budget before the start of the fiscal year July 1.

Commission CEO Blake Rowe said revenue from assessments — a fee collected at the time of a wheat crop's first sale — is projected at \$1.85 million in the coming fiscal year. The projection is derived from USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service acreage estimates and yield averages.

Rowe said the average annual revenue from assessments is \$2.2 million. Meanwhile, research funding requests for the coming fiscal year topped \$2.6 million, Rowe said.

"What do you fund versus what do you cut?" he said. "It puts more pressure on the commission to adjust funding."

The commission carefully built up its reserve fund

over time, but operates under rules that require spending down reserves when they reach a certain level. The commission is most likely looking at a \$2.2 million budget, he said.

The reserve spending rules come from wheat farmers who "want us to use grower dollars for grower purposes," Rowe said.

Wheat acreage is down in part because some Willamette Valley growers have returned to planting grass seed after giving it up when the market plummeted. Grass seed markets are closely tied to housing and other development, which stalled during the recession.

"The demand for grass seed really fell through the floor," Rowe said. "We saw a number of grass seed acres shift over to wheat. Now we've seen some go back to grass seed."

Wheat acreage fluctuation is not unusual. Oregon growers planted about 965,000 acres in 2010, but harvested acreage dropped to 868,000 acres in 2013 and 818,000 acres in 2014, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service.

In other business, commission members toured OSU facilities. Among other things, they saw a combine and seed drill scaled for work on research plots.

Lawsuit over Oregon wolf delisting ruled 'moot'

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

An environmentalist legal challenge against Oregon's decision to remove wolves from the state's endangered species list has been dismissed due to legislation passed earlier this year.

Wolves were delisted by state wildlife regulators last

year, but three environmental groups — Cascadia Wildlands, Center for Biological Diversity and Oregon Wild — asked the Oregon Court of Appeals to reverse that decision, claiming it wasn't based on sound science.

Earlier this year, lawmakers passed House Bill 4040, which held that the Oregon Department of Fish and Wild-

life had followed the law in delisting wolves.

Opponents of the bill claimed it would deny the environmentalists their day in court. Supporters, on the other hand, argued the lawsuit was filed to pressure wildlife regulators while Oregon's wolf recovery plan is updated.

Gov. Kate Brown signed the bill in March despite envi-

ronmentalist calls for a veto, stating in a signing letter that the "trajectory of wolf populations in Oregon remains strong."

The legislation was expected to nullify the legal challenge, which proved correct — on April 22, the Oregon Court of Appeals held that HB 4040 rendered the environmentalist petition moot.

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