

# 'Reliability of workers is not the same anymore'

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H-2A guestworkers increase growers' costs. Workers often are paid piece rate but their minimum wage is higher than state minimum wages, and when a grower hires them he has to pay his domestic workers the same rate. Growers must advertise regionally before applying to bring guestworkers from foreign countries. Employers also must provide them with housing and round-trip transportation to their home countries.

In Washington, apples are a \$2.4 billion annual crop. Other labor-intensive crops add billions of dollars more in economic activity. The Washington Employment Security Department says the number of seasonal farmworkers averages about 54,000 per month and hits more than 90,000 in peak months.

But an estimated 50 to 70 percent of non-H-2A farmworkers are in the U.S. illegally from Mexico and elsewhere, according to industry and government sources. Enforcement of immigration laws at the border and in the U.S., workers returning to Mexico and workers retiring or moving into other occupations are all cited by labor experts as causes of the labor shortage.

In the first three quarters of fiscal year 2017, Washington had 15,611 H-2A workers, ranking fourth behind Georgia, North Carolina and Florida, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

California, with 12,292 H-2A workers, ranked fifth, the only other Western state in the top 10.

Nationwide, the Labor Department has certified 160,084 H-2A guestworkers in the first three quarters of 2017 compared to 165,741 for all of 2016.

## National outlook

Kerry Scott is program manager of masLabor in Lovington, Va., the largest provider of temporary H-2A guestworkers in the nation. The company also provides temporary H-2B non-agricultural workers.

Scott's company has grown from 600 to 700 clients three years ago to 1,000 today and provided 18,000 workers nationwide this year. That's up from 15,000 a year ago.

"We're on track to exceed that next year. The pace of growth is accelerating," Scott said.

In recent weeks, Scott has met with several large vegetable growers in Ohio, vintners in Virginia and tree fruit companies in Washington state, all of which plan to use H-2A workers next year, he said.

The company has supplied about 500 H-2A workers in Washington and will probably double that next year, he said.

Washington is hurting, he said, because it's relied on migrant workers from California, and that supply is drying up.

The farmworker shortage is nationwide, statistics show. An estimated 730,800 seasonal and year-round farmworkers were employed nationwide in 2016, according to the USDA National Agricultural Statis-



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Jose Guzman pulls picker tickets from d'Anjou pear bins before they are trucked to Independent Warehouse, Dryden, Wash., on Sept. 11. Crews are busy and short pickers in the height of harvest.

tics Service. That's down nearly 6 percent from 777,300 in 2013.

They were paid an average wage of \$12.98 per hour, up from \$12.54 per hour in 2015.

Last year, 157,500 were in California and received an average of \$13.81 per hour; 68,800 were in Washington and Oregon and received an average of \$13.90 per hour.

## California

In the nation's most productive farm state, Fresno County Farm Bureau President Ryan Jacobsen says the labor supply was tighter — and earlier — than usual this year, starting with the asparagus harvest in May and remaining that way all summer.

"Numerical information is very hard to come by, but from the pulse on the ground this is probably the tightest year in a decade," Jacobsen said. "As the economy recovers and people move into other sectors and we don't deal with immigration on a federal level, we continue to see tightening of that supply."

Daniel Sumner, director of the Agricultural Issues Center at University of California-Davis, said he believes the labor shortage is getting worse every year. Harvest pressure is exacerbated by hot weather and by several commodities that are harvested at the same time in different regions, he said.

The shortage is driving up wages, but it's still rare that crops go unpicked because of a lack of labor, Sumner said.

Jason Resnick, vice president and general counsel of Western Growers in Irvine, which represents farmers who grow about half the produce in the U.S., agreed that labor is tight and getting tighter.

"Our members have been telling us anecdotally for a decade now that the lack of labor is pressing farmers, but over the last couple of years it has gotten much worse," Resnick said.

Many workers are staying in Mexico as that nation's economy has improved and more jobs become available, he said. Farmworkers in the U.S. are aging, and their children aren't interested in farmwork, he said.

"The political environment and rhetoric combined with some of the enforcement actions taken by the federal gov-

ernment act as a deterrent as well," he said.

While California increased its use of H-2A guestworkers by 15 percent in the first three quarters of 2017 over the same period last year, the program is not for everyone.

"It's notoriously slow, bureaucratic, costly and unpredictable," Resnick said.

Use of H-2A is still "a fraction of a fraction of a percent in terms of total farm labor," Jacobsen said. "It's not a great solution for California agriculture because it's cumbersome and it's very difficult to target in February your harvest need in August."

Many growers will get by with planting less, fallowing land, planting crops that can be mechanically harvested and moving production to Mexico and other countries, Resnick said.

## Washington

The Wenatchee River Valley, which stretches 22 miles upstream from Wenatchee to Leavenworth, is touted as the best micro-climate for growing pears in the world. D'Anjou is the top variety, but they are dense and heavy, causing many pickers to prefer picking apples, which weigh less.

In recent years, not all pears have been picked. Growers, particularly the last to harvest in higher elevations at the head of the valley, have increasingly found it hard to find pickers.

One of them, Dennis Nicholson, said he's short pickers but is getting help from neighboring crews and the wives of regular workers. His son also took vacation time from his regular job to help and people with other jobs have been helping on weekends.

"H-2A doesn't work for the small grower because we don't have the housing nor the capital to pay the money they want," he said.

"Labor is tight but I'm inclined to say it might be a little bit better than the last couple of years," said Greg Rains, horticulturist and fieldman for Blue Star Growers, a Cashmere packer.

Blue Star has a sign along U.S. Highway 2/97 seeking workers for a night shift. The sign was up last year as well.

More growers share pickers, and there are no days off for domestic workers, Rains said.

A lighter crop and greater

use of H-2A guestworkers has helped ease the shortage some this year, he said.

"In the last five years, we've gone from zero to maybe as high as 20 percent of our acreage in H-2A. That's a guess," Rains said.

Nonetheless, piece rate wages keep trending upward, he said.

Pablo Avila, orchard manager at Independent Warehouse in Dryden, last year paid \$23 per bin plus a \$1 a bin bonus if pear pickers stayed the whole season. This year, he said, the pay is \$27 with a \$2 a bin bonus to stay the season.

"We are one of the highest but there are others paying more," he said, adding the average is about \$25.

Avila said he has 35 pickers and needs 70 to harvest the 80 acres.

"That's pretty much the same as last year and means it just takes a little longer to get it done," he said.

Independent does not use H-2A workers but is thinking about it for next year, he said.

In Wenatchee, Stemilt AgServices, a subsidiary of Stemilt Growers that manages more than 8,000 orchard acres, used 750 H-2A workers a year ago. It has built housing for 1,200 beds for H-2A and domestic workers in the last three to four years and will build that much or more in the next three years, Bob Mathison, company board chairman, said.

His nephew and company president, West Mathison, said Stemilt AgServices has 1,000 H-2A workers and will hire a few more next year depending on the winter fruit bud analysis.

"We feel labor is tighter. It was reported the unemployment rate is the lowest since the inception of keeping county records. It feels that way to us. I believe the Central Washington economy is doing very well and we are just running out of people who want to work in all sectors," West Mathison said.

Farther north around Lake Chelan, harvest labor is adequate but there's no surplus, said Harold Schell, director of field services at Chelan Fruit Cooperative.

"Growers with H-2A have supply, but guys without it are sharing crews and just getting by," Schell said.

They also are helped, he said, by the pear and Gala apple crops picking short of the vol-

ume and size estimate.

"We're at peak," he said. "It used to be with more Red Delicious that (labor) peak was early October but now with Honeycrisp and Gala, peak is Labor Day to mid to late September."

The co-op was short 400 packers three weeks before start of cherry harvest in June, but met the need by advertising in other states and paying higher wages, said Reggie Collins, general manager.

In mid-September, the co-op had enough packers but was a month away from full operations. It was paying \$12 per hour, \$1 more than it paid last year.

"We were 80 to 100 people short at this time last year, so I'm feeling better about it now," Collins said.

In Othello, Paula McKay, manager and principal owner of Mar-Jon Labor, the region's largest farm labor contractor, said it's been "a lot harder" to find the 2,100 workers she's needed this year.

"Reliability of workers is not the same anymore. Since there's a shortage, workers take advantage of it and move back and forth between employers depending on who is paying more," McKay said.

She paid the state minimum wage of \$11 per hour for weeding but other contractors paid \$11.50 to \$12 and at times she lost a third or more of her crew to them, she said. Onion topping was her biggest shortage, she said.

"We did get the job done for our growers but at a slower pace," she said.

Growers who normally have 80 domestic pickers had no more than 15 this year, McKay said.

## Oregon and Idaho

In Oregon's Willamette Valley, Doug Kraemer, a St. Paul blueberry grower and former state Board of Agriculture member, said there's no excess but that he had enough workers this season and believes other berry and hop growers did as well.

"I think it's about the same as last year but it seems better only because I expected worse," he said.

He's appreciative that as many migrants showed up from California as did, he said.

A grower since 1980, Kraemer has about 500 acres of blueberries, pays average

piece rate, doesn't use H-2A and remains concerned about the future.

In Caldwell, Idaho, Mike Williamson said he had 15 to 20 workers to harvest his white peaches, which was enough because the crop was lighter than anticipated.

Other tree fruit and wine grape growers "are able to make it because of lighter crops from spring frosts, but guys are pulling from H-2A (visa foreign guestworkers) and from jail work release and prisons so there's really not an oversupply," Williamson said.

A new state law three years ago makes it easier for growers to employ prison inmates.

## Solution elusive

For years, representatives of labor-intensive agriculture have lobbied Congress to help provide a legal and more stable workforce through immigration reform.

In short, growers want legal work authorization for illegal immigrants who make up 50 to 70 percent of their workforce. They also want a more responsive and less costly foreign guestworker program.

But political divisions in Congress over that and broader aspects of immigration reform leave growers wondering if it will ever get done.

"I've played the D.C. game where you go back and talk to all the politicians and my head got bloodied and sore against that brick wall and I'm not going to do it anymore," Kraemer said.

"Someday, we won't get our crops harvested and you would think consumers will pressure Congress to do something because growers haven't been able to get it done," he said.

"It's like a teeter-totter. Up one day and down the next. We're all hopeful our country will figure this out and want agriculture to be profitable to feed those we need to feed," Collins said.

Western Growers' Resnick said it's hard to rate the chances of immigration reform in Congress.

"We have spoken to many members in Congress who recognize the need to pass immigration reform measures that will address the current and future labor needs of farmers," he said.

Previous efforts have failed. Western Growers' president, Tom Nassif, was instrumental in negotiating the agricultural segment of the 2013 Senate immigration bill with the United Farm Workers union. It failed in the House.

Kerry Scott, of masLabor, said he's not optimistic about the chances of immigration reform.

"We have been waiting, essentially since 1986, for Congress to do something comprehensive," Scott said. "If anything, it's getting harder and harder for Congress to tackle big problems."

"There's talk about Congress and everyone coming together to help the hurricane victims of Houston and now Florida. That it might be a step in the right direction. And now (President) Trump working with Democrats, but I don't know how long it will last."

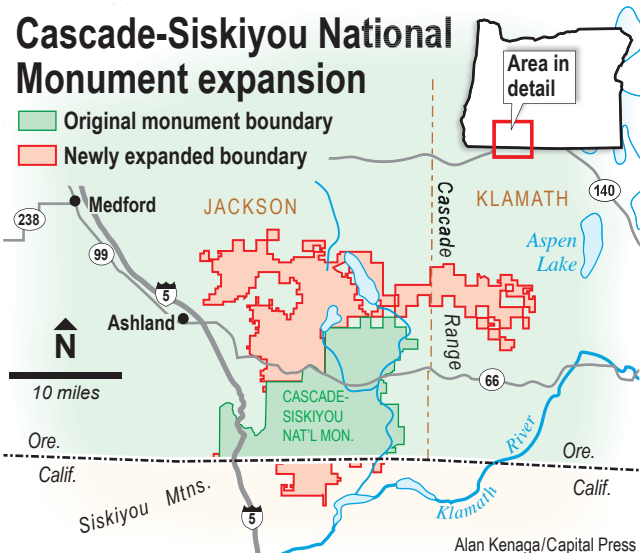
## Antiquities Act permits presidents to establish national monuments

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Zinke's report notes that roughly 16,600 acres of the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument consist of O&C Lands "harvest land base." However, the timber industry claims 40,000 acres of O&C Lands within the monument's boundaries should be open to logging.

The American Forest Resource Council, which represents timber companies, alleges a resource management plan that limits harvest to those 16,600 acres violates the O&C Act, said Lawson Fite, the organization's general counsel.

Though it's uncertain whether the Trump administration would remove all 40,000 acres from the monument, or just 16,600 acres, AFRC is encouraged the expansion is being scrutinized, he said.



"We think that by including any O&C lands in the monument, the previous president overstepped his authority under the Antiquities Act and violated the O&C Act," Fite said.

The Antiquities Act per-

mits U.S. presidents to establish national monuments, but whether later administrations can shrink their boundaries remains a point of contention.

Zinke believes that Trump can make such revisions, cit-

ing 18 such changes made in the past, but monument supporters argue that an attempt to decrease the Cascade-Siskiyou's boundaries would be unlawful.

"It would be a sad waste of the Department of the Interior's resources and taxpayer money," said Dave Willis, executive director of the Soda Mountain Wilderness Council, an environmental group.

Zinke's report wrongly indicated that motorized travel within the monument is prohibited and that hunting and fishing are disallowed, Willis said.

It's unclear whether these errors were due to sloppiness or an attempt to spur support for reducing the monument's size, which is opposed by a wide swath of the public, he said.

"It looked like pretty shoddy work," Willis said.

## Over past 3 months most areas west of Rockies have been extraordinarily dry

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The USDA reported this week that irrigated crops in Washington continue to do well, though other crops are showing signs of stress. Some 40 percent of pasture and rangeland was described as "very poor," according to the USDA.

The reservoirs that supply irrigators in the Yakima River Basin held 114 percent of the normal amount of water for this time of year, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation reported Sept. 14. Streams statewide, however, are starting to show the effects of the summer. Some 43 percent of the streams monitored by the U.S. Geological Survey were running below normal Thursday, up from 16 percent one month before.

In Oregon, most livestock were being fed hay because of

poor pasture conditions, the USDA reported.

In Idaho, 19 percent of the state is in drought, while 8 percent of California is in drought. The figures were little changed from the week before.

Federal climatologists said that over the past three months most areas west of the Rockies have been extraordinarily dry, but that pattern is expected to change.

Odds are that Washington, Oregon, Idaho and California will be cooler and wetter than normal for the last two weeks of September, according to the U.S. Climate Prediction Center.

The center warned that temperatures in the four states probably will be much below normal on Sept. 19-23. Unusually heavy rains are expected in southwest Oregon.