

# Growers say despite good pay it's work Americans don't want to do

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in Mexico to work.

It's work most Americans don't want to do, growers say.

The number of H-2A workers is growing rapidly because domestic workers are becoming more scarce. Industry and government sources estimate 50 to 70 percent of domestic farmworkers already in the U.S. are illegal immigrants. It costs growers more to hire H-2A guestworkers but they represent an increasingly rare commodity for farmers — a legal, dependable workforce.

Farmers need that, given the value of their crops. The annual farmgate value of Washington apples alone is \$2.4 billion and the value of other labor-intensive crops throughout the nation is billions of dollars more.

During the first three quarters of fiscal year 2018, Washington farmers hired 20,070 H-2A workers, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. That compares to 15,611 hired during the first three quarters of 2017 and 18,535 for all of last year.

Washington farmers are in third place behind their counterparts in Florida and Georgia in hiring H-2A workers in the first three-quarters of this year. Before the harvest is finished, they may hire nearly 30,000, according to the farm labor association WAFLA. That would be an increase of about 60 percent from last year.

Zirkle Fruit Co. of Selah, Wash., is the second largest single employer of H-2A workers in the nation, hiring 4,169 for the first three-quarters of this year.

Nationally, 193,603 H-2A workers have been certified for the first three-quarters of 2018. That's up from 160,084 for the same period in 2017 and about 8 percent of all farmworkers. The final 2018 tally will surpass the 200,049 that were hired for all of 2017.

The need for guestworkers has spiraled upward during the past 13 years. In 2005, the total number of H-2A guestworkers hired nationwide was 48,336. The average length of stay for H-2A guestworkers in 2016 was 6.4 months.

## Meager roots

Bailon was born, raised and still lives in Francisco Javier Mina, a village of about 950 people in the state of Durango midway, between the U.S. border and Mexico City.

The village is 7,000 feet above sea level, and most residents make their living hand-picking beans and corn for 200 pesos — about \$10.50 — per day, Bailon says. The median education there is six years of school. Bailon attended school for nine years.

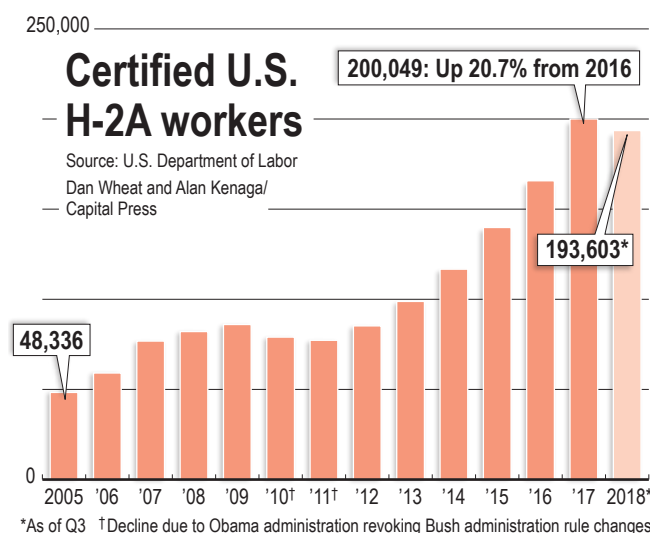
Of the town's 316 dwellings, 98 percent have electricity, 1.6 percent have piped water, 74 percent have toilets, 96 percent have televisions, 55 percent have cars, 3.7 percent have computers and 0.4 percent have internet access, according to the census website [en.mexico.pueblosamerica.com](http://en.mexico.pueblosamerica.com). Twenty households have dirt floors and five have just one room.

Bailon's parents have always picked beans and corn for a living, and he and his three siblings have done the same.

"We had to work and help our parents from as early as we could for no wages," he said. "It's what we had to do to survive. We always had food but not a lot."



Antonio de Jesus "Chuy" Bailon, front left, carries his picking ladder along with other crew members as they shift from one block of Gala apples to another at Griggs Orchards in Orondo, Wash.



## Good money

Bailon and his wife, Carolina, have two daughters, ages 11 and 9, and a son who is just a few months old.

Five years ago, he learned of the H-2A program through other workers and decided it was worth leaving home to make more money.

He worked for Evans Fruit Co. in Mattawa orchards his first two years and now is in his third year at Griggs Orchards in Orondo. He was recruited through WAFLA.

He came in mid-March to prune and train trees and will leave in mid-November when the last apples are picked. He will return home in time for several weeks of the local bean and corn harvest.

For pruning and thinning in Orondo this season, he earned the H-2A minimum wage of \$14.12 per hour and on piece rate during cherry harvest made \$20 per hour.

Piece rate is a rate of pay based on the amount of fruit picked. It's an incentive for fast work. At Griggs Orchards the rate was \$6 per 18-pound bucket for Rainier cherries and \$3.25 for red cherries. The piece rate is \$25 per bin for apples. Bailon averages one bin per hour, so he's making \$25 per hour, or \$200 per day.

"This is good. You don't really make money in Mexico," he said.

At the minimum H-2A wage, he makes more in one hour than he makes during an entire day in Mexico. At the apple piece rate he earns about 19 times more per day.

Bailon said he earned \$18,000 on H-2A last year, used about \$1,800 of that to live on while in the U.S., mostly for food, and took the rest home to his family, including his parents. He expects to make the same amount this year.

The H-2A pay has enabled him to buy more clothes for his family, and now he's building a new house.

"But it's hard being away from family," he said. "It's lonely. I do it because we need the money."

He says the H-2A job has enabled him to rise to the middle class. Previously, he considered himself to be poor. He hopes to continue in H-2A as long as he can and feels fortunate to have the opportunity.

## Changes ahead?

Bills in Congress propose replacing the H-2A program with a new H-2C program in which growers no longer would have to provide housing and transportation between the job and guestworkers' country of origin. They could also pay a lower minimum wage.

Even if he had to pay for transportation and housing and accept a lower minimum wage, Bailon said

he would still work in the U.S. because he could still make more money than in Mexico.

He said he doesn't follow congressional debates about guestworker programs or immigration.

"In my opinion, everything is pretty good the way it is now," he said. "I'd like to keep things the way they are."

He knows people who have immigrated to the U.S. illegally, but Bailon said he didn't because the "risk is high and I'd rather do things the right way."

At Griggs Orchards, picking starts shortly after day break and ends by mid-afternoon.

A relatively new bus carries the workers between the orchard and the bunkhouse that houses 20 workers in five rooms. Each room has four bunks and a television. There's also a common kitchen and eating area.

Bailon and his roommates watch TV or sometimes walk to the nearby Orondo School to play soccer.

One of the roommates, Raul Ruiz, 25, previously picked apples in the state of Durango.

"It gave me experience but we don't make as much picking there," he said.

Bailon lives in a different part of Durango and didn't have the opportunity to pick apples before coming to the U.S.



Antonio de Jesus Bailon carefully transfers his picker bag of Gala apples into a bin so he doesn't bruise them. He picks a 700-800-pound bin of apples in one hour, earning \$25 per hour.

## Grower perspective

John Griggs, co-owner of Griggs Orchards, says this is his third year of hiring H-2A workers.

"There's not a snowball's chance in hell we would get our crops picked without it," Griggs said of H-2A. "It's just the lack of domestic workers. It keeps getting tighter and tighter every year. We really noticed the crunch a few years ago in cherries and last year in apples as well."

He hired 36 H-2A workers his first year, 60 last year and 104 this year out of his total peak workforce of 245 during cherry harvest in June and July. Most of his workers are still domestic, but the number keeps shrinking.

Bailon and Ruiz are part of a crew of 20 H-2A guestworkers that came in March and will stay into November. Griggs hired 84 more in mid-May who stayed into July for cherries and then went to work at Valicoff Fruit Co. in Wapato, Wash.

On June 19, the workers were in their first few days of picking Griggs' Orondo Ruby cherries. They were all young men in their late teens and early 20s. They were intent on their work and didn't talk or sing, as experienced domestic pickers often do. But they were slow.

"They were first year out of Oaxaca and were very quiet. They wanted to do a good job. They were good workers, just not fast in that first week in cherries," Griggs said.

"Picking cherries is a tough thing, especially when you are picking for color and size right out of the gate," he said. "But they were getting the knack after the first week and were eager to learn. I was impressed with them and would like to have them back. They all asked to come back next year."

Griggs paid \$10 per night per worker to house the 84 in the Washington Growers League's Brender Creek farmworker housing in Cashmere.

Foreign guestworkers cost Griggs more, not just in transportation and housing but he has to pay his domestic workers the same minimum wage he pays those on H-2A visas and offer housing to those who live beyond a 50-mile radius. He also has to advertise for domestic workers through the first half of the H-2A contract.

"We got a few that way during cherries but very few, maybe 15," he said. "The downside is the cost and productivity of it the first couple of years. But having a stable, legal workforce outweighs all of that."

# Pacific Northwest remains mired in drought that has led to massive wildfires, low stream flows

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John Day Basin to almost 80 percent along the South Coast.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown has declared a drought emergency in nine counties: Lincoln, Douglas, Klamath, Lake, Harney, Grant, Wheeler, Baker and Morrow. Ken Stahr, surface water program manager for the Oregon Water Resources Department, said he has been surprised by how widespread this year's drought is.

"I think we saw some of this coming over the winter," Stahr said, referring to low mountain snowpack and rapid snowmelt in May. "We had kind of a late series of storms where we thought it may help. But by May, it was gone."

Ivan Gall, administrator for the Field Services Division at OWRD, works with the 21 local watermasters across the state. He said they have largely had to begin regulating water deliveries sooner, curtailing junior users to satisfy senior water rights holders.

"We've had to cut deeper into the list of junior users more quickly than compared to normal precipitation years," Gall said.

It is a similar situation in Washington state, which is also seeing below-average flows in nearly half of all rivers and streams. Temperatures have also averaged about 3 degrees above normal statewide in July, making the period between May and June the fourth-warmest on record.

Jeff Marti, drought coordinator for the Washington Department of Ecology, said the state is going through a significant precipitation deficit, which is being most felt in the west and southwest portions of the state.

"We have some rivers that have been establishing record low flows for this day of the year throughout the summer," Marti said.

The Department of Ecology has been curtailing water for some 88 users in the Chehalis River Basin since late May and early June. State officials, however, have not gone as far as to declare a drought emergency.

Drought conditions are creeping east into Idaho as well. About 70 percent of the state is listed as "abnormally dry," and the remaining 30 percent is in "moderate drought."

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Climate Prediction Center is calling for an in-

creased likelihood of more unseasonably warm weather across all three states for the next three months, and likely below-average precipitation in most of Oregon and Washington.

The longer drought lingers, the more it will heighten anxiety over reservoir storage heading into next year, Marti said.

"You could have a vast recovery, or there could be some anxiety if we have a sub-par snowpack year," he said. "You like to have good carryover. It gives you a little cushion heading into next year."

Philip Mote, director of the Oregon Climate Change Research Institute at Oregon State University, said based on forecasts, the Northwest drought will not be easing up soon, and in fact more areas in eastern Washington may actually start developing more severe conditions.

In many ways, Mote said this year is reminiscent of 2015, another drought year amplified by low snow and spring precipitation. Some coastal streams in Oregon have lower flows this year than they did in 2015, Mote said.

"For anything relying on snowpack, that was a difficult year," Mote said.

# Assistance plan includes direct payments to farmers, government food purchases

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Direct payments to producers will be capped at \$125,000 per person, and payments could go out as early as mid-September, Bill Northey, USDA undersecretary for farm production and conservation, said.

Direct payments will be provided to cotton, corn, dairy, pork, soybeans, sorghum and wheat producers. Farmers need to establish eligibility with the Farm Service Agency and will be paid a certain rate for each commodity for 50 percent of their actual production, he said.

"We want to make it simple for producers but also effective," he said.

Total payments in this round of assistance are expected to range from about \$3.6 billion for soybean producers to \$96 million for corn producers.

Wheat producers are expected to get \$119.2 million.

USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service will administer the food purchases and distribution leg of the assistance. Purchases will be spread out over several months in four phases and many

will be different than what USDA normally purchases, reflecting the specific products that are being hit with the tariffs, Greg Ibach, USDA undersecretary for marketing and regulatory programs, said.

The agency will guard against displacing the Section 32 purchases it already makes for nutrition-assistance programs, he said.

More than 30 different products will be purchased, including fruits, nuts, livestock products, legumes, potatoes, rice and sweet corn. Top expected purchases are about \$559 million for pork, \$111.5 million for sweet cherries, \$93.4 million for apple and \$85 million each for dairy and pistachios.

USDA also expects purchases of \$2.1 million for hazelnuts, \$44.5 million for potatoes and \$63.3 million for almonds.

The Foreign Agricultural Service will administer the trade-promotion assistance. It will be a cost-share program and more flexible and more streamlined than existing market-development programs. Assistance will likely begin being distributed in early 2019, Ted McKinney, USDA undersecretary for trade and foreign agricultural affairs, said.