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EMPOWERING PRODUCERS OF FOOD & FIBER



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

H-2A-visa foreign guestworkers from Mexico use a Bandit Xpress-DBR harvest assist platform picking Fuji apples at Valicoff Fruit Co., Wapato, Wash., a year ago.

FOREIGN GUESTWORKER GROWTH SLOWS

‘Farm economics have taken a hit which likely plays a huge role in the slowdown’

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

U.S. producers filled a record number of agricultural positions with foreign guestworkers in 2019, with 257,667 jobs certified.

But while the use of guestworkers has grown by more than 18% in each of the past five years, that growth slowed to just 6.1% this year.

“Farm economics have taken a hit which likely plays a huge role in the slowdown,” said Michael Marsh, president of the National Council of Agricultural Employers in Washington, D.C.

He said he expected greater growth but that factors against that probably included trade issues and retaliatory tariffs. Weather anomalies prevented some plantings so harvest required fewer workers, he said.

DOL-certified H-2A positions do not equate to the total number of workers. Sometimes one position is filled by multiple people, and in other cases one person fills several positions at different times. For example, in Washington state the farm labor



Michael Marsh

association filled more than 16,000 positions this year with about 10,000 people. Sequential contracts allow people to work for one grower and then another.

Greater increases in H-2A usage in recent years have been cited as evidence of a national farm labor shortage, particularly seasonal farm labor.

But Marsh said he doesn't think the slowdown means the labor shortage is lessening.

The 257,667 certified H-2A positions are 12.8 to 17.2% of the estimated 1.5 million to 2 million farmworkers in the nation.

“Labor is still tight. My guess is the shortage will continue to get worse. Unemployment is still very low in the U.S. so consequently there aren't enough workers to fill these jobs and the H-2A program will continue to grow,” Marsh said.

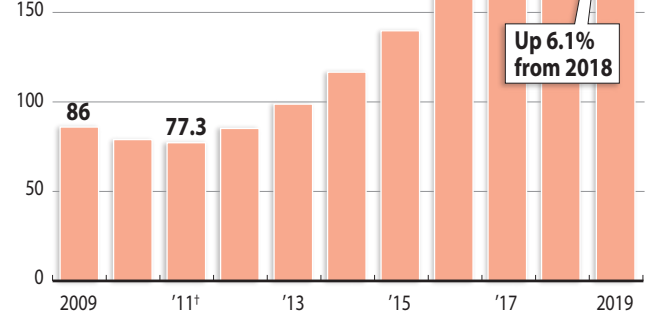
Kerry Scott, program manager for masLabor in Lovingson, Va., said perhaps bad weather, tariffs and a slowing of overall national job growth may all

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Certified H-2A* guestworkers nationally

(Thousands of workers)

*Certified by U.S. Dept. of Labor. †Decline in 2010 and 2011 due to Obama administration revoking Bush administration rule changes.



Top H-2A* ag worker states

| Area | 2018 | 2019 | Percent change |
|-------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| 1. Florida | 30,462 | 33,598 | 10.3% |
| 2. Georgia | 32,364 | 29,480 | -8.9 |
| 3. Washington | 24,862 | 26,226 | 5.5 |
| 4. California | 18,908 | 23,321 | 23.3 |
| 5. N. Carolina | 21,794 | 21,605 | -0.9 |
| U.S. total | 242,762 | 257,667 | 6.1% |

Source: U.S. Dept. of Labor

Dan Wheat and Alan Kenaga/Capital Press

USFWS estimates cost of recovering streaked horned lark

Plan calls for leasing, buying farmland

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

The streaked horned lark, a ground-nesting songbird partial to farm fields and found in the Willamette Valley and southwest Washington, will cost \$22.9 million to \$81 million over 25 years to recover, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates in a plan published in the Federal Register.

About 1,500 larks are in the two

states, and the agency hopes to up the number to 5,725. The price tag will depend on whether federal, state and private organizations lease or buy habitat, mostly from Oregon farmers.

“The largest area of potential habitat for streaked horned larks is agricultural land in the Willamette Valley,” according to the draft recovery plan. The department will take comments on the plan until Dec. 30.

The lark was listed in 2013 as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. The USFWS enacted a special rule that protects farmers and ranchers from prosecution if

they accidentally harm a lark while doing routine agricultural activities.

The new recovery plan proposes to retain the rule. USFWS reasons it will encourage farmers to keep spaces open.

According to the plan, the next step toward recovery is to develop incentive programs that encourage producers to provide habitat for larks, perhaps by grazing or field burning.

Larks were more abundant when natural fires burned the landscape. Larks benefited when Oregon grass seed farmers were allowed to burn their fields, according to USFWS.

“The decline of the streaked

horned lark in the Willamette Valley is correlated to the reduction in field burning,” the plan states.

The conversion of grass-seed fields to other crops, such as blueberries and hazelnuts, also reduces lark habitat.

In Washington, larks are known primarily at airports, on dredge spoils and artillery ranges at Joint Base Lewis-McChord. Like burning, bombing creates lark habitat, according to USFWS, though exploding shells have been known to cause what the agency calls “nest failure.”

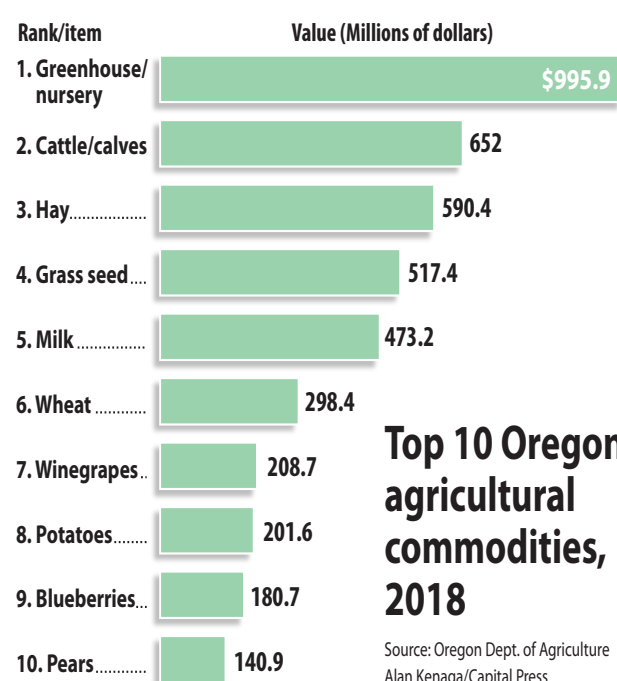
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David Leonard/USFWS

The streaked horned lark, found in the Willamette Valley and southwest Washington, will cost \$22.9 million to \$81 million over 25 years to recover, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates in a plan announced Oct. 30.

Agencies compile top agricultural commodities for Oregon



Top 10 Oregon agricultural commodities, 2018

Source: Oregon Dept. of Agriculture
Alan Kenaga/Capital Press

By GEORGE PAVLEN
Capital Press

PORTLAND — Greenhouse and nursery products continue to reign as Oregon's most valuable agricultural commodity, with goods nearly topping \$1 billion in 2018, according to data compiled by the Oregon Department of Agriculture and USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service.

The agencies released their annual brochure of facts and figures about Oregon agriculture on Oct. 31, including crop production, acreage and livestock inventory over the previous year.

Dave Losh, Oregon state statistician for NASS, said most of the information

comes from surveys collected directly from farmers and ranchers across the state.

“We have a cooperative agreement with (the state), and it goes back to our mission of providing timely and accurate statistics on agriculture,” Losh said. “We're able to focus on Oregon agriculture, which has a lot of diversity.”

Oregon famously grows more than 200 different agricultural commodities, from wheat and cattle in the east to grass seed, hazelnuts and Christmas trees in the lush Willamette Valley.

The USDA ranks the top 20 most valuable agricultural commodities in Oregon, and while Losh said the

list does fluctuate each year depending on crop prices, the greenhouse and nursery industry has routinely led the pack since 2009.

Ten years ago, greenhouse and nursery products were valued at \$732.5 million. In 2018, the total was \$995.9 million — a 35% increase.

Losh said there were few other major surprises in the top 20, compared to 2017. Cattle and calves remained number two, at \$652 million, and hay number three at \$590.4 million. Grass seed and milk flipped spots at fourth and fifth, respectively, likely due to lower dairy prices.

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