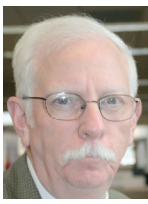


Workers: ‘We wouldn’t be able to farm here without them’

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have contributed to the slowing of H-2A growth but that masLabor continues to provide about 20% more H-2A (agricultural) and H-2B (non-agricultural) workers annually.



Kerry Scott, masLabor

MasLabor is the largest provider of temporary H-2A and H-2B workers in the nation. Last year, it had 1,200 clients and provided more than 20,000 workers in 47 states. This year, Scott said, it has 1,400 clients and 27,000 workers in 47 states, roughly half H-2A and half H-2B.

“Demand will not stop until the next downturn in the economy,” he said.

He believes farm labor remains tight everywhere because of the booming national economy with only 3.5% unemployment.

“Older farmworkers are aging out of the workforce, border security continues to tighten so fewer undocumented workers are available, but the major thing is that with near full employment the last jobs to be filled are seasonal ones in hot, dirty, outdoor work,” Scott said.

H-2A in Washington

The growth rate of H-2A in Washington slowed to 5.48% in 2019 after growth in five of the prior six years of 30% or more each year.

Many factors play into the slowing but mainly an “explosion in the cost to constructing housing” for workers and “the fact that labor-intensive agriculture cannot afford the government-imposed wage rates,” said Dan Fazio, executive director of Wafila, a farm labor association in Olympia.

Wafila is the largest H-2A provider in the West filling more than 16,000 H-2A positions in 2019, with 90% or more in Washington. The number was 15,771 in 2018. H-2A has grown in hemp and shellfish, Fazio said.

Mike Gempler, executive director of Washing-



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

A pickers wanted sign for Fuji apples along U.S. Highway 97 in Pateros, Wash., Oct. 7, 80 miles south of the Canadian border. Generally, farm labor is more scarce the farther north in Central Washington.



Mike Gempler, executive director of the Washington Growers League

ton Growers League in Yakima, said the growth rate is slowing because need is being met.

The League worked with masLabor to fill 4,785 H-2A positions in Washington

2019, Scott said.

There also are at least three large tree fruit companies that do their own H-2A recruitment, Zirkle Fruit Co., Selah, being the largest last year at 4,169 positions and this year at 3,400.

Washington labor shortage

The labor shortage in the labor-intensive Washington tree fruit industry was generally believed to be improving in 2017 and 2018 because of more H-2A workers, a smaller apple crop in 2018, better pay and, in 2018, more migrants from California because of a light cherry crop there.

This year, it’s the same general improvement because of the number of H-2A workers, but even as the domestic workforce continues to deteriorate because of low unemployment, Gempler said.

Spot shortages continue with growers relying on domestic workers sometimes having trouble finding work-



Dan Fazio, director of WAFILA

ers who will stay as long as needed, he said.

“There are other options for them to work. There just isn’t adequate number of people interested in seasonal farmwork,” he said.

Fazio said labor is extremely tight as evidenced by the state workforce agency referring only 204 domestic workers to employers using H-2A workers.

Labor is usually tighter in the northern half of Central Washington because there are fewer people and its farther for migrant workers to travel, Gempler said.

Asparagus and other vegetable growers have a hard time finding labor and are hard pressed to make a profit if they hire H-2A workers because of the high AEW minimum wage, Gempler said.

Dave Taber, an Oroville grower virtually on the U.S.-Canadian border, said he had enough workers but only by using H-2A.

“We wouldn’t be able to farm here without them,” he said. “The shortage isn’t as acute as in the past but increases in the AEW are not sustainable.”

Jeff LaPorte, director of field services at Chelan Fruit Cooperative in Chelan, said labor was tight but generally good during cherry harvest

Lark: Goal is to boost that number to 5,725

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While the agency works on a recovery plan, the lark is the subject of a federal lawsuit brought by the Center for Biological Diversity. The center is suing to change the lark’s status to endangered and to end the special rule for agricultural activities.

U.S. District Judge Michael Mosman in Portland ruled in June in the center’s favor and ordered USFWS to reconsider the rule and the lark’s status. He set a deadline for March 2021. Meanwhile, the rule and the lark’s sta-

tus are unchanged.

The Interior Department appealed Mosman’s ruling this month to the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

The American Farm Bureau, Oregon Farm Bureau and Oregon Seed Council have intervened in the lawsuit on the government’s side.

Streaked horned larks once nested in the swath of land stretching from British Columbia to California. The birds are unknown now north of Seattle and south of Eugene. Most larks, about 1,100, are in the Willamette Valley. The goal is to boost that number to 4,500.

The agency estimates there are 252 larks in the Interstate 5 corridor in southwest Washington and 167 along the Lower Columbia and on the coast. The goal is to increase those numbers to 700 and 525, respectively.

The agency does not consider re-establishing larks in northwest Washington or southwest Oregon necessary for recovery.

Climate change could help larks if drought kills trees and prairies expand, according to a biological assessment of the species. On the coast, however, rising sea levels could disturb lark habitat.

List: Absent from the top 20 is industrial hemp

Continued from Page 1

Winegrapes rose two spots to seventh, breaking \$200 million for the first time. Hazelnuts remained 13th, though the value climbed from \$73.6 million to \$91.8 million as more acres reach nut-bearing age.

One notable absence from the top 20 is industrial hemp. Losh said the USDA did not collect data on hemp last year, since it was only legalized under the 2018 Farm Bill last December.

“USDA is still working through the process of how to put in regulations and put in a statistics program for hemp,” Losh said.

The Oregon Department of Agriculture issued permits in 2019 for more than 63,000 acres of hemp, which is more acreage than potatoes and onions combined. It remains unclear how many acres of hemp will actually be harvested.

Medical and recreational marijuana, meanwhile, is not regulated by ODA, but rather the Oregon Liquor Control Commission.



Courtesy Oregon Department of Agriculture

At more than \$1 billion, nursery and greenhouse products topped Oregon’s list of commodities in 2018.

The 2018 facts and figures brochure also contains general information about Oregon farms and ranches, which were previously reported by NASS in the 2017 U.S. Census of Agriculture.

Oregon has 37,200 total farms over 16 million acres. Local farmers lead the country in production of several crops, including hazelnuts, grass seed, Christmas trees, rhubarb and blueberries, while ranking second in crops like pears and mint and third in hops and onions. Losh said the figures are

intended not only for producers, but state lawmakers and local governments to provide a full picture of Oregon’s agricultural production and value.

“We hope it’s valuable for lawmakers, particularly the Oregon legislature and local government as well, when they’re making decisions regarding agriculture,” he said. “We’ve seen some loss in farmland due to urban expansion and other uses, and we are fully supportive of trying to make sure that good farmland stays in production.”

Wenatchee Valley. Had the crop been larger, he wouldn’t have had enough pickers, he said.

For the second year in a row, he was able to pay \$25 per bin and no bonus compared with \$27 per bin plus a \$2 bonus per bin to stay the entire season in 2017 because of fewer pickers.

Peak is 100 pickers to pick 200 acres of pears. This year, 24 of the 100 were H-2A compared with 14 last year.

In Wiley City, southwest of Yakima, Sean Gilbert, co-owner of Gilbert Orchards, said he couldn’t say labor was any better or worse.

“It’s kind of hanging in there. The bigger issue is just the AEW. The higher wage rates we’re having to pay is the bigger issue right now,” Gilbert said.

Rob Valicoff, president of Valicoff Fruit Co., in Wapato, said he had plenty of workers with 200 H-2A and 15 domestics. He was figuring to give them a weekend off in mid-October, which is unusual, because harvest was going so well.

Most large companies expanding their use of H-2A were doing well but some small growers advertised for pickers, he said.

“Without H-2A the industry would be really short,” Valicoff said.

Oregon and Idaho

Labor is extremely tight in Oregon, Fazio said, where he’s unaware of any domestic

worker referral by the state to workers using H-2A.

There has been some H-2A growth, as a percentage, mostly in the nursery industry, he said.

Last year, he said, Oregon needed the H-2A program but that the state government is hostile to the program, charging employers unemployment insurance tax on H-2A workers even though the workers are not eligible for unemployment insurance.

Tom Peerbolt, senior consultant for Peerbolt Crop Management in Portland, said the boom in hemp drew workers away from late-season blueberry picking. Blueberries and grapes are big, labor-intensive crops in the Willamette Valley.

Labor has been short in Idaho for a number of years without much relief, said Joel Anderson, executive director of Snake River Farmers Association, in Heyburn, and an immigration attorney.

“Unemployment rates make it very difficult for our growers to find domestic workers,” Anderson said.

The association provided workers in 2019 to fill 4,300 H-2A positions mostly in the mountain West and some in the Midwest and South, up a little from the more than 4,000 last year.

The association had as many inquiries this year as in past years but several farmers could not afford H-2A because of the high AEW and without enough workers quit farming, Anderson said.

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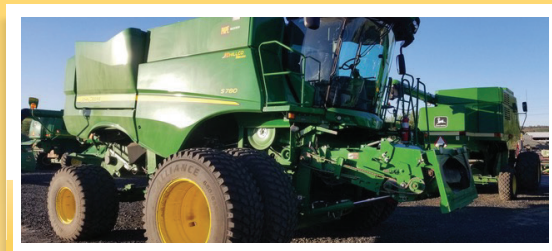
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