



Addressing the Farm Labor Issue Means Job Creation

Robert A. Smith, senior vice president for public affairs



It appears that another session of Congress will end without providing an adequate guest worker program for American agriculture. In addition, the administration continues to create hardships for employers by making our failed H-2A program more difficult to use and by expanding immigration enforcement actions.

At the same time, Washington is making a lot of noise about job creation and retention. Maybe it's time for Congress to realize that addressing the farm labor issue and ensuring a stable and legally authorized farm workforce *is* a job creation and retention issue. The legal authorization of farm workers has a lot less to do with border security and citizenship concerns than with growing jobs in the United States food sector and promoting economic activity in rural and urban communities.

As the departments of Labor and Homeland Security squeeze farm employers, they create a situation whereby

fewer farms want to grow high-value, labor-intensive farm products. They almost seem like they are trying to discourage American farmers from producing fruits, vegetables, nursery and milk and that they are trying to send more U.S. dollars to foreign countries so we can import more farm products grown in conditions that we know little about. We are importing more food while providing job opportunities to foreign countries.

With a mix of dairy, nursery, vegetable, greenhouse and fruit, Northeast agriculture is especially vulnerable to farm labor shortages. Just look at the percentage of labor cost to total farm sales for proof. Generally, Northeast farmers spend substantially more on labor in comparison to farm sales than the national average. Our production of labor-intensive crops, such as fruits, vegetables, berries, nursery, greenhouse and dairy make us much different from states that primarily produce grains and beef cattle.

Farm Labor Cost Per \$100 of Total Farm Sales
(Northeast and Selected States)

	Dollars Per \$100	National Ranking
Connecticut	\$27	3
Massachusetts	\$26	4
New Jersey	\$26	5
Rhode Island	\$26	6
New Hampshire	\$20	10
Maine	\$16	12
New York	\$14	14
Vermont	\$12	17
California	\$22	8
Illinois	\$4	46
Iowa	\$3	50
National Average	\$9	

“The legal authorization of farm workers ... [means] ... jobs in the United States food sector and ... economic activity in rural and urban communities.”

Farms & Farms with Hired Employees

(Northeast States, 2007 and 1997 Agricultural Census Data)

	Number of Farms		Number of Farms with Hired Employees		% Change in Farms with Hired Employees
	2007	1997	2007	1997	
Connecticut	4,916	3,687	1,140	1,587	-28.1%
Massachusetts	7,691	5,574	1,972	2,637	-25.2%
New Jersey	10,327	9,101	2,415	3,216	-24.9%
Rhode Island	1,219	735	324	344	-5.8%
New Hampshire	4,166	2,937	860	1,109	-22.4%
Maine	8,136	5,810	1,886	2,885	-34.6%
New York	36,352	31,757	9,273	13,140	-29.4%
Vermont	6,984	5,828	1,884	2,783	-32.3%
TOTAL	79,791	65,429	19,754	27,701	-28.6%

Declining number of farms with employees

It is not easy to be a farm employer. It is hard to find employees and the morass of regulatory requirements is daunting and not getting easier. Furthermore farms need to compete, but higher-than-average labor costs can make a farm noncompetitive.

Federal and state policy makers need to be concerned about difficulties that confront farm employers. This challenge is clear in looking at the numbers between 1997 and 2007. While the number of Northeast farms increased during this period, the number of farms that hired employees declined by an amazing 29 percent in 10 years.

Not Getting Easier

As I spoke with farmers over the past year, it became clear that, even with 9 percent unemployment, local, native-born American workers do not seek nor stay in farm jobs. Some opponents to agricultural guest worker legislation say that a better guest worker program takes jobs from Americans.

They are wrong. Just the opposite is true! As I said above: Addressing the farm labor issue head-on with guest worker/legal authorization legislation is about job creation and farm retention.

Allowing for an adequate workforce on our farms enables farm owners to stay in business and produce high-quality, safe, local farm products. Further, it allows businesses that serve farms — those involved with farm inputs, services and processing — to keep jobs in the United States. Just look at the employment numbers. On average, every farm owner and farm employee results in the creation of three jobs directly related to agriculture. If there is no production on U.S. farms, most of those jobs are lost or shipped overseas. Make no mistake, farm businesses want a properly authorized work force.

For the past 15 years, many in the Northeast farm community have tried to obtain a practical guest worker program and a process for on-farm workers to obtain legal status so they could continue as productive members of American agriculture.

If policymakers are concerned about keeping jobs in the United States, they need to quit the games, find political courage and address the farm labor issue. This will keep jobs in the United States, allow productive use of American farmland, ensure a safe food supply and stimulate economic development. ♦

Northeast States Farm and Closely-Related Employment

(2002 Census: Data Not Available for 2007)

	Farm Owners/Employees	Ag Services/Inputs/Processing
Connecticut	10,064	20,810
Maine	10,533	19,851
Massachusetts	10,929	52,062
New Hampshire	4,956	11,092
New Jersey	9,148	65,515
New York	59,514	150,294
Rhode Island	1,328	8,607
Vermont	9,432	8,861
Northeast	115,904	337,092