

Wisconsin's Migrant and Immigrant Agricultural Labor Force

Migrant Labor

Migrant workers are defined as seasonal workers that are unable to return to their place of residence within the same day. Wisconsin farms have relied on migrant workers since the early 1900s. Early migrants were of European descent and were seasonally recruited from low-income areas of large Midwestern cities to plant and harvest sugar beets and other vegetables. Many of these workers eventually purchased their own farms and became permanent residents of the state.¹

Beginning in the late 1920s, migrant workers of Hispanic origin became more common. During the 1930s, approximately 3,000 workers arrived annually from the Texas-Mexico region.¹ The Bracero program, which was designed to alleviate farm labor shortages, allowed foreign born workers to enter the United States from 1951-1964 without a work permit. As a result, the number of migrant farm workers in Wisconsin peaked at about 15,000 in the 1950s.¹

Increased mechanization and the development of effective herbicides in the 1950s and 1960s lessened the need for farm labor. By the late 1960s, there was a shift from predominantly field work to employment in food processing plants. Today, about two-thirds of migrant farm workers are employed in canning and food processing jobs while one-third work in agricultural fields. Just less than one percent of all farms, or four percent of farms hiring farm labor, report hiring migrant workers.²

In a 2002 survey, growers said they were likely to go out of business, go into other lines of work, or sell their land

Figure 1

Migrant Farm Workers, 1945-2009^{1, 3}

Migrant farm workers peaked at 15,000 in the 1950s and have declined ever since. In 2009, there were approximately 4,000 migrant agricultural workers in Wisconsin.

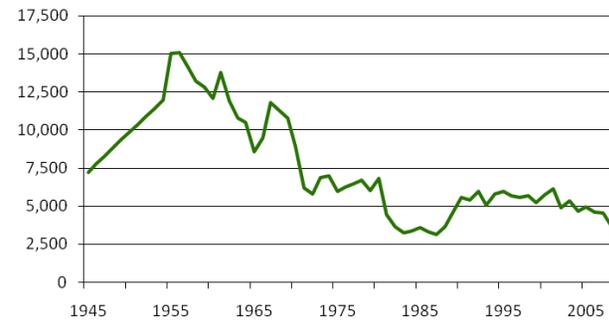
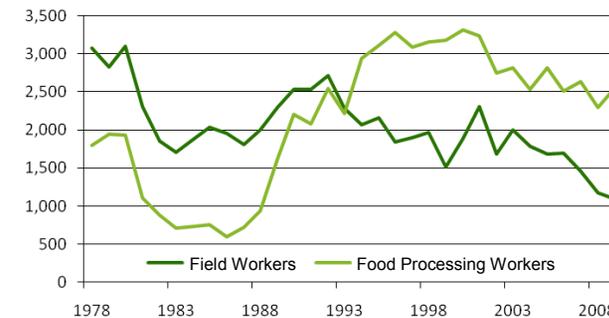


Figure 2

Migrant Farm Workers in Field and Food Processing Jobs, 1978-2009^{1, 3}

As the need for manual labor on farms has declined, the number of jobs in food processing facilities has increased.



and equipment if migrant farm labor were unavailable. Few said they would be able to raise wages to attract local workers. Food processors, on the other hand, would likely mechanize. About half would raise wages to attract local workers.¹

Immigrant Labor

Unlike field and food processing jobs which are seasonal in nature, Wisconsin's dairy, livestock and meat packing industries rely on workers year-round. The meatpacking industry has relied on immigrant labor since the early 1900s. In just the last decade, there is an emerging trend among dairy farms to hire immigrant labor as well.⁴

In recent years, many dairy farms have sought to increase productivity by increasing herd sizes and by shifting to three-times-per-day milking schedules.⁴ Due to changes in family farm structure—farm operators are getting older, family size is decreasing, and family members are more likely to work off-farm²—most farms cannot meet these new labor demands.

Dairy farm operators report difficulty finding reliable U.S. born workers willing to fill these new positions. As a result, there are at least 5,300 immigrant workers on Wisconsin dairy farms, more than 40 percent of all hired employees. The majority of these workers are of Mexican or Hispanic origin.⁴ Failure to resolve the debate on federal immigration policy may have an impact on dairy producers in this state.

Compiled by Rebecca Roberts, Center for Land Use Education, 2010.

¹ Slesinger, Doris P. and Steven Deller. The Status and Economic Impact of Wisconsin's Migrant Farm and Food Processing Work Force. Program on Agricultural Technology Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison. Research Report No. 11. February 2003.

² U.S. Department of Agriculture. 2007 Census of Agriculture.

³ Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, Bureau of Migrant Labor Services. 2009 Migrant Population Report.

⁴ Harrison, Jill, Sarah Lloyd, and Trish O'Kane. Overview of Immigrant Workers on Wisconsin Dairy Farms. Program on Agricultural Technology Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison. February 2009.