



STRATEGIES

Create a stable, legal food and agriculture workforce

Challenges

Meet future demand for food

Conserve and enhance water, soil, and habitat

Improve nutrition and public health

Strengthen farms, workers, and communities

Strategies

Increase agricultural productivity

Align U.S. diet with Dietary Guidelines

Encourage diversity and coexistence of farming systems

Attract young people to food and agriculture

Create a stable, legal workforce

Advance landscape-scale management

Provide risk management tools for producers

Reduce post-harvest waste

Strengthen regional food systems

Ensure access to nutritious food

Align production & environmental outcomes

Enable adaptation to change

Understand and reduce adverse health impacts

Redirect research, education, and extension priorities and strengthen institutions

Create a stable, legal food and agriculture workforce in the United States.

Hired farmworkers are a large proportion of farm labor today, especially on larger farms. At more than one million workers, seasonal and year-round hired workers now make up more than one-third of the agricultural labor force. Hired workers are particularly important for labor-intensive crops such as fruit, tree nuts, and vegetables, and on confinement livestock operations. These workers earn less than most U.S. workers (about \$9 an hour in 2010), face difficult working conditions, have limited education and health care options, and are heavily foreign-born. It is estimated that more than one-half are not legally authorized to work in the United States, and have not been for more than two decades.

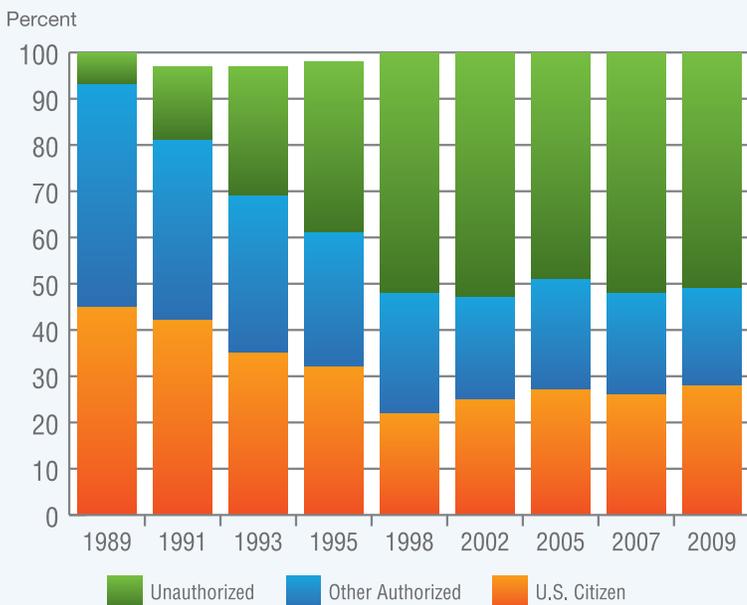
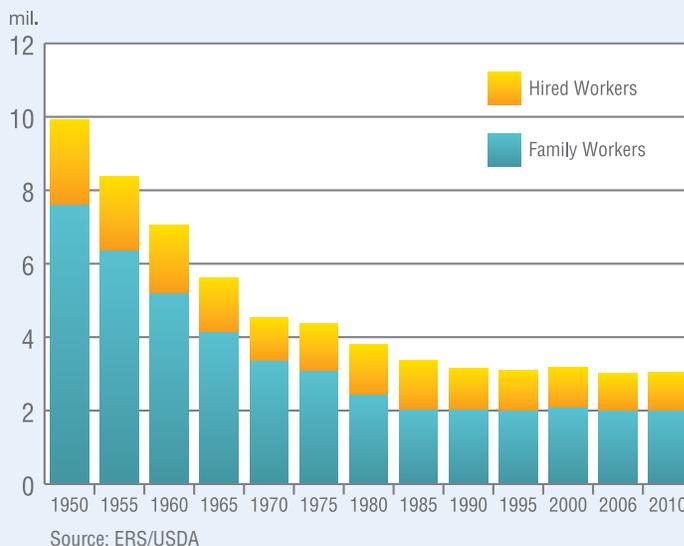
Farm-labor policies are controversial. The H-2A guest worker program certifies only about 75,000 to 100,000 temporary foreign workers per year and is considered cumbersome and expensive by many growers. Growers complain about farm labor shortages, and some have lost crops when workers were unavailable. Recently, farm industry leaders have pressed for immigration reform to provide a more reliable supply of legal foreign agricultural workers. At the same time, some farmworker groups are concerned that expanded foreign guest worker programs will lower farm wages and worsen working conditions. Efforts to compromise have been complicated by larger congressional debates and disagreements on the best approaches to overarching immigration reform.

Agriculture labor and its related issues are not confined to fields and farms. Today, more people are working in the agricultural input and food processing sectors than in growing and raising food and livestock. Many food processing jobs, like farm labor jobs, tend to offer low wages (\$12 an hour in 2010 on average) and rely increasingly on the same immigrant labor pool.

A critical objective of future farm and food policy should be to improve wages and working conditions throughout the food and agriculture sectors, and to support comprehensive immigration policy reform that recognizes the importance of immigrant labor in these industries. Efforts to improve the skills, supply, and working conditions of the farm and food labor force will require careful balancing of the goals of improving social justice, individual opportunity, community well-being, and the competitiveness of farm and food businesses.

Farmworkers in United States Agriculture, 1950-2010

While the overall number of workers in the farm labor force has fallen precipitously since 1950, the share of hired workers in that supply has increased. As reflected in the Farm Labor Survey conducted by USDA, the share of hired workers has increased from 23 percent in 1950 to 33 percent in 2006, while the overall labor force fell by nearly 70 percent. This decline largely reflects the increase in mechanization that has characterized the history of row crop production and to a lesser extent livestock production.

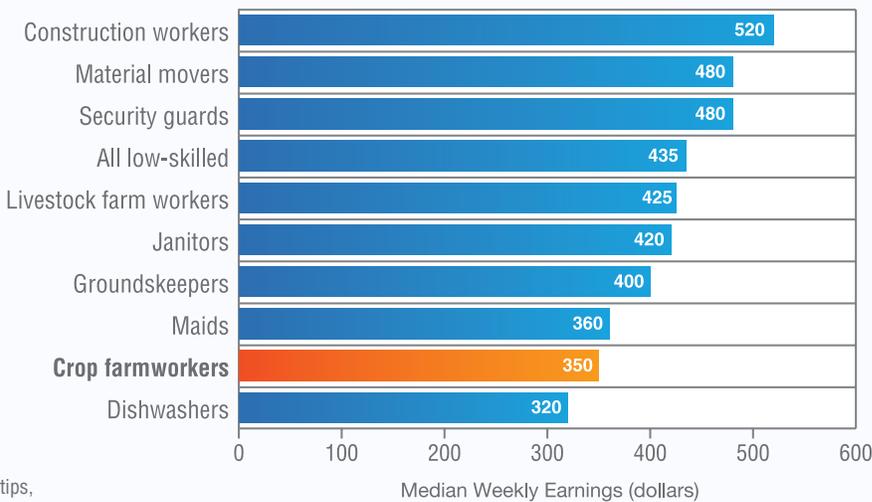


Legal Status of Hired Crop Farmworkers, 1989-2009

According to data collected by the U.S. Department of Labor, the share of hired workers without legal status but doing crop field work has increased from 7 percent in 1989 to about 50 percent in recent years, a seven-fold increase. The share of U.S. citizens doing such work declined between 1989 and 1998, but has been increasing modestly in recent years.

Median Weekly Earnings Across Select Low-Skilled Occupations, 2006

Across a variety of low-skilled jobs in the United States performed by significant numbers of undocumented workers, wages for crop farmworkers are among the lowest.



Note: Weekly earnings include wages, bonuses, overtime pay, tips, and other forms of monetary compensation.