

Crop Production

# State ag needs migrant labor

By BILL KNUDSON



IMMIGRATION policy has become a major source of contention in the U.S. Congress. Much of this debate has focused on illegal immigration via the Mexican-U.S. border. What has been often overlooked during this debate is the role migrant workers play in the agriculture sector.

**Key Points**

- State ag industry is nation's fourth-largest employer of migrant farmworkers.
- Migrant labor is used to produce 24 crops in the state.
- Reducing or eliminating migrant workers also affects the processing industry.

Migrant workers are a critical component of the state's farm sector and are particularly important for fruit and

vegetable growers.

It has been estimated that the state's agricultural industry employs 45,000 migrant workers during a typical summer. Most of the workers are of Mexican descent and originate from Texas or Florida. In keeping with the diversity of crops grown in Michigan, the state is the fourth-largest employer of migrant farmworkers in the nation.

Migrant labor is used to produce 24 crops in the state including floriculture/




**ABOUT 45,000** migrant workers are employed in the state during the summer.

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ornamentals and turfgrass products. The total farm-level economic activity generated by these crops is \$3.88 billion, which accounts for 58% of the total economic activity generated by the farm sector and related input supply industries.

The seasonality of employment and the fact that workers need to move from farm to farm to stay employed make it difficult to find workers that are residents of Michigan, many of whom are more interested in permanent employment at one location. As a result, the farm sector is dependent on migrant workers from planting to harvest.

**Craft good policy**

A policy that restricts or eliminates access to migrant workers from other countries would have negative impacts on Michigan agriculture.

Fewer or no migrant workers would increase the cost of production for farmers, especially for growers of fruits and vegetables. As a result, acreage devoted to agriculture will decline as less profitable farms exit the industry. As the supply of some farm products, especially fruits and vegetables decline, the price of these products will increase.

The net effect: fewer farmers, fewer acres devoted to fruit and vegetable production, a smaller agri-food system, and higher prices for consumers, especially for fresh produce. The reduction or elimination of migrant workers also affects the processing industry because less raw product will flow through processing plants.

The American Farm Bureau Federation estimates that in the short term, Michigan's farm production would decline between \$151 million and \$272 million, and that in the long term, the loss would be between \$196 million and \$362 million. These impacts do not include the effect on Michigan's economy as a whole.

**Preventing loss to economy**

To prevent these adverse events from occurring, any type of immigration policy should contain provisions that ensure a stable supply of migrant workers from other countries. Whether in the form of a guest worker program or through other policies, a stable supply of migrants is necessary for a healthy and diverse agri-food system in the state.

More information can be found online at [aec.msu.edu/product/documents/working/migrantworkers.pdf](http://aec.msu.edu/product/documents/working/migrantworkers.pdf).

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