

Illegal Immigration Is Down, Changing the Face of California Farms

Farmers are turning to workers on seasonal visas and mechanizing what they can. Many labor-intensive crops are shifting south of the border.

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GONZALES, Calif. — It looks like a century-old picture of farming in California: a few dozen Mexican men on their knees, plucking radishes from the ground, tying them into bundles. But the crews on Sabor Farms' radish patch, about a mile south of the Salinas River, represent the cutting edge of change, a revolution in how America pulls food from the land.

For starters, the young men on their knees are working alongside technology unseen even 10 years ago. Crouched behind what looks like a tractor retrofitted with a packing plant, they place bunches of radishes on a conveyor belt within arm's reach, which carries them through a cold wash and delivers them to be packed into crates and delivered for distribution in a refrigerated truck.

The other change is more subtle, but no less revolutionary. None of the workers are in the United States illegally.

Both of these transformations are driven by the same dynamic: the decline in the supply of young illegal immigrants from Mexico, the backbone of the work force picking California's crops since the 1960s.

The new demographic reality has sent farmers scrambling to bring in more highly paid foreign workers on temporary guest-worker visas, experiment with automation wherever they can and even replace crops with less labor-intensive alternatives.

"Back in the day, you had people galore," said Vanessa Quinlan, director of human resources at Sabor Farms. These days, not so much: Some 90 percent of Sabor's harvest workers come from Mexico on temporary visas, said Jess Quinlan, the farm's president and Ms. Quinlan's husband. "We needed to make sure we had bodies available when the crop is ready," he said.

For all the anxiety over the latest surge in immigration, Mexicans — who constitute most of the unauthorized immigrants in the United States and most of the farmworkers in California — are not coming in the numbers they once did.

There are a variety of reasons: The aging of Mexico's population slimmed the cohort of potential migrants. Mexico's relative stability after the financial crises of the 1980s and 1990s reduced the pressures for them to leave, while the collapse of the housing bubble in the United States slashed demand for their work north of the border. Stricter border enforcement by the United States, notably during the Trump administration, has further dented the flow.

“The Mexican migration wave to the United States has now crested,” the economists Gordon Hanson and Craig McIntosh wrote.

As a consequence, the total population of unauthorized immigrants in the United States peaked in 2007 and has declined slightly since then. California felt it first. From 2010 to 2018, the unauthorized immigrant population in the state declined by some 10 percent, to 2.6 million. And the dwindling flow sharply reduced the supply of young workers to till fields and harvest crops on the cheap.

The state reports that from 2010 to 2020, the average number of workers on California farms declined to 150,000 from 170,000. The number of undocumented immigrant workers declined even faster. The Labor Department's most recent National Agricultural Workers Survey reports that in 2017 and 2018, unauthorized immigrants accounted for only 36 percent of crop workers hired by California farms. That was down from 66 percent, according to the surveys performed 10 years earlier.

The immigrant work force has also aged. In 2017 and 2018, the average crop worker hired locally on a California farm was 43, according to the survey, eight years older than in the surveys performed from 2007 to 2009. The share of workers under the age of 25 dropped to 7 percent from a quarter.



The radish harvest at Sabor Farms. “Back in the day, you had people galore,” the company’s human resources director said.

Desperate to find an alternative, farms turned to a tool they had largely shunned for years: the H-2A visa, which allows them to import workers for a few months of the year.

The visa was created during the immigration reform of 1986 as a concession to farmers who complained that the legalization of millions of unauthorized immigrants would deprive them of their labor force, as newly legalized workers would seek better jobs outside agriculture.

But farmers found the H-2A process too expensive. Under the rules, they had to provide H-2A workers with housing, transportation to the fields and even meals. And they had to pay them the so-called adverse effect wage rate, calculated by the Agriculture Department to ensure they didn't undercut the wages of domestic workers.

It remained cheaper and easier for farmers to hire the younger immigrants who kept on coming illegally across the border. (Employers must demand documents proving workers' eligibility to work, but these are fairly easy to fake.)

That is no longer the case. There are some 35,000 workers on H-2A visas across California, 14 times as many as in 2007. During the harvest they crowd the low-end motels dotting California's farm towns. A 1,200-bed housing facility exclusive to H-2A workers just opened in Salinas. In King City, some 50 miles south, a former tomato processing shed was retrofitted to house them.

"In the United States we have an aging and settled illegal work force," said Philip Martin, an expert on farm labor and migration at the University of California, Davis. "The fresh blood are the H-2As."

Immigrant guest workers are unlikely to fill the labor hole on America's farms, though. For starters, they are costlier than the largely unauthorized workers they are replacing. The adverse effect wage rate in California this year is \$17.51, well above the \$15 minimum wage that farmers must pay workers hired locally.

So farmers are also looking elsewhere. "We are living on borrowed time," said Dave Puglia, president and chief executive of Western Growers, the lobby group for farmers in the West. "I want half the produce harvest mechanized in 10 years. There's no other solution."

Produce that is hardy or doesn't need to look pretty is largely harvested mechanically already, from processed tomatoes and wine grapes to mixed salad greens and tree nuts. Sabor Farms has been using machines to harvest salad mix for decades.

"Processed food is mostly automated," said Walt Duflock, who runs Western Growers' Center for Innovation and Technology in Salinas, a point for tech entrepreneurs to meet farmers. "Now the effort is on the fresh side."

Apples are being grown on trellises for easy harvesting. Scientists have developed genetically modified “high rise” broccoli with long stems to be harvested mechanically. Pruning and trimming of trees and vines is increasingly automated. Lasers have been brought into fields for weeding. Biodegradable “plant tape” packed with seeds and nutrients can now be germinated in nurseries and transplanted with enormous machines that just unspool the tape into the field.

A few rows down from the crew harvesting radish bunches at Sabor Farms’ patch, the Quinlans are running a fancy automatic radish harvester they bought from the Netherlands. Operated by three workers, it plucks individual radishes from the ground and spews them into crates in a truck driving by its side.

And yet automation has limits. Harvesting produce that can’t be bruised or butchered by a robot remains a challenge. A survey by the Western Growers Center for Innovation and Technology found that about two-thirds of growers of specialty crops like fresh fruits, vegetables and nuts have invested in automation over the last three years. Still, they expect that only about 20 percent of the lettuce, apple and broccoli harvest — and none of the strawberry harvest — will be automated by 2025.

Some crops are unlikely to survive. Acreage devoted to crops like bell peppers, broccoli and fresh tomatoes is declining. And foreign suppliers are picking up much of the slack. Fresh and frozen fruit and vegetable imports almost doubled over the last five years, to \$31 billion in 2021.

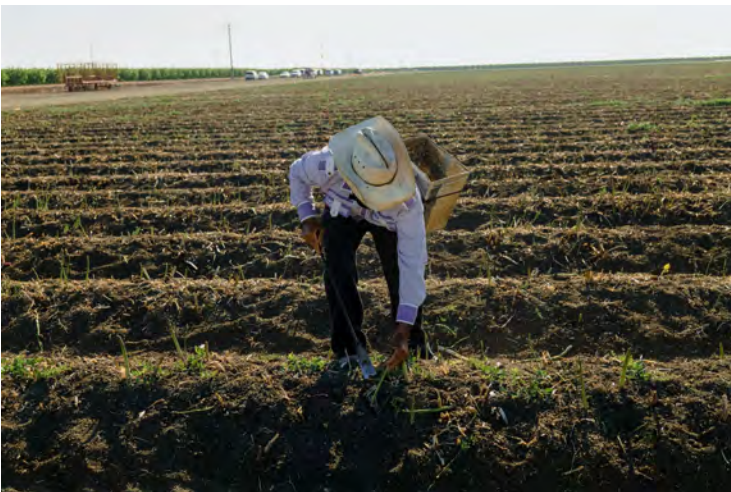
Consider asparagus, a particularly labor-intensive crop. Only 4,000 acres of it were harvested across the state in 2020, down from 37,000 two decades earlier. The state minimum wage of \$15, added to the new requirement to pay overtime after 40 hours a week, is squeezing it further after growers in the Mexican state of Sinaloa — where workers make some \$330 a month — increased the asparagus acreage almost threefold over 15 years, to 47,000 acres in 2020.

H-2A workers won’t help fend off the cheaper Mexican asparagus. They are even more expensive than local workers, about half of whom are immigrants from earlier waves that gained legal status; about a third are undocumented. And capital is not rushing in to automate the crop.

“There are no unicorns there,” said Neill Callis, who manages the asparagus packing shed at the Turlock Fruit Company, which grows some 300 acres of asparagus in the San Joaquin Valley east of Salinas. “You can’t seduce a V.C. with the opportunity to solve a \$2-per-carton problem for 50 million cartons,” he said.

While Turlock has automated where it can, introducing a German machine to sort, trim and bunch spears in the packing shed, the harvest is still done by hand — hunched workers walk up the rows stabbing at the spears with an 18-inch-long knife.

These days, Mr. Callis said, Turlock is hanging on to the asparagus crop mainly to ensure its labor supply. Providing jobs during the asparagus harvest from February to May helps the farm hang on to its regular workers — 240 in the field and about 180 in the shed it co-owns with another farm — for the critical summer harvest of 3,500 acres of melons.



Workers harvested asparagus by hand at A-Bar Ag Enterprises in Firebaugh, Calif.

Losing its source of cheap illegal immigrant workers will change California. Other employers heavily reliant on cheap labor — like builders, landscapers, restaurants and hotels — will have to adjust.

Paradoxically, the changes raking across California's fields seem to threaten the undocumented local work force farmers once relied on. Ancelmo Zamudio from Chilapa, in Mexico's state of Guerrero, and José Luis Hernández from Ejutla in Oaxaca crossed into the United States when

they were barely in their teens, over 15 years ago. Now they live in Stockton, working mostly on the vineyards in Lodi and Napa.

They were building a life in the United States. They brought their wives with them; had children; hoped that they might be able to legalize their status somehow, perhaps through another shot at immigration reform like the one of 1986.

Things to them look decidedly cloudier. “We used to prune the leaves on the vine with our hands, but they brought in the robots last year,” Mr. Zamudio complained. “They said it was because there were no people.”

Mr. Hernández grumbles about H-2A workers, who earn more even if they have less experience, and don’t have to pay rent or support a family. He worries about rising rents — pushed higher by new arrivals from the Bay Area. The rule compelling farmers to pay overtime after 40 hours of work per week is costing him money, he complains, because farmers slashed overtime and cut his workweek from six days to five.

He worries about the future. “It scares me that they are coming with H-2As and also with robots,” he said. “That’s going to take us down.”