

Immigrants & the Agricultural Sector

With Congress returning from August recess, immigration reform will be among the top issues for members of the House of Representatives. While many Americans may take for granted the food on their grocery shelves, immigrants play a critical role in getting products from our farms to our supermarkets. This fact sheet—the sixth in AS/COA's series on immigrants and the economy—details five reasons why immigrants are critical for the agricultural sector. Access AS/COA's Get the Facts series at: www.as-coa.org/immigration-facts.

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Five Reasons Why Immigrants are Critical for Our Agricultural Sector

 **1 With agricultural employers continuously in search of more employees, immigrant workers fill the jobs that the industry desperately needs to remain competitive.**

- Seventy-one percent of crop workers surveyed between 2007 and 2009 were foreign born.¹
- In North Carolina, only seven U.S.-born workers—less than 3 percent of those hired—completed the growing season in 2011—despite an 11 percent unemployment rate in the state. Mexican workers accounted for 90 percent of workers who completed the season.²

 **2 A reduced agricultural labor force leads to production losses that impact not just that industry but the U.S. economy overall.**

- Expansion of the H-2A temporary worker program—as envisioned in the Senate immigration bill passed in July—could result in a 3.4 percent increase in fruit exports and a 5.4 percent increase in vegetable exports.³
- An expansion of the H-2A program would add \$6.6 billion to U.S. GDP and \$3.3 billion to personal income by 2017.⁴
- Without comprehensive immigration reform, a shrinking agricultural labor force will lead to \$5 to \$9 billion in production losses every year.⁵
- In 2011, after passage of HB 87, a law that restricted immigrant job opportunities in Georgia, the state suffered an estimated \$300 million loss in harvested crops and a \$1 billion hit to the overall economy.⁶

3 Immigrant farm laborers create jobs for U.S.-born individuals in areas of the economy beyond agriculture.

- In 2012, every three to five H-2A farm workers in North Carolina created one job for a U.S.-born worker.⁷
- An expansion of the H-2A program under the Senate-passed immigration reform bill would add over 51,000 jobs in the United States.⁸

4 With a growing population, immigrant labor is vital to helping the agriculture industry produce the food required to feed Americans.

- By 2050, 9.6 billion people will be living on our planet, with over 400 million people living in the United States, making it the fourth most populous country in the world.⁹ Having a fully staffed agricultural labor force is vital for the United States to be able to produce the food it will need.
- Immigrants will be critical to filling future labor gaps in the economy overall and in agriculture, with 76 million baby boomers retiring and only 46 million U.S.-born workers entering the workforce by 2030.¹⁰
- A survey in California—the number one state in cash farm receipts— found that 71 percent of farmers who grow labor-intensive crops (trees, fruits, vegetables, table grapes, raisins, and berries), reported employee shortages in 2011.¹¹ This has forced them to change crops, to start using mechanized farming (which cannot be used with fruits and vegetables that bruise easily) or to lose part of their crop.¹²

5 Immigrant agricultural workers help boost the population in rural areas that may be experiencing an outflow of local residents, creating a future pipeline of workers for the industry.

- New AS/COA–Partnership for a New American Economy research finds that for every 1,000 immigrants settling in a county, 250 U.S.-born individuals follow, drawn by increased economic opportunity.¹⁴
- The population in non-metropolitan counties as a whole declined for the first time between April 2010 and July 2012.¹⁵
- From 2007 to 2011, there was an average of 2.1 million foreign-born individuals living in areas where agriculture is the main industry.¹⁶

This fact sheet is a product of the AS/COA Immigration and Integration Initiative, which advances the integration of immigrants and promotes positive dialogue around the economic contributions of immigrants and Latinos overall across the United States, and was produced by **Leani García** and AS/COA Director of Policy **Jason Marczak**. For more information, visit AS/COA Online at: www.as-coa.org. For media inquiries or to speak with an expert on this topic, please contact Adriana La Rotta in our communications office at: alarotta@as-coa.org.

Endnotes

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