



In Immigration Reform Debate, Is Agribusiness Crying Wolf?

By Rick Mines and Ed Kissam
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Editor's Note: Farm groups are pushing Congress to include a guest worker program as part of any comprehensive immigration reform bill. A guest worker program, they say, would ensure a steady supply of workers and prevent a labor shortage if there is an exodus of agricultural workers. Their argument is based on federal research that showed a dramatic decrease in foreign-born farm labor after the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986. But a closer look at the studies shows a flaw in this argument. Commentators Rick Mines and Ed Kissam write that farmworkers didn't leave the sector because they were legalized; they were simply following the historical pattern of workers in this industry.

Rick Mines has conducted research on Mexico-U.S. migration and the farm labor market for more than 40 years. He developed the concept of the National Agricultural Worker Survey (NAWS) and supervised it during its first decade. Ed Kissam led one of the first studies of post-IRCA farm labor supply and is the co-author of "Working Poor: Farmworkers in the United States."

Agribusiness argues that guest worker provisions are crucial because legalizing currently unauthorized farmworkers will result in a mass exodus from farm work. But the enactment of comprehensive immigration reform would not cause such an exodus.

Let's look at what happened to the farmworkers who were newly legalized by the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986. The National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS), conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor since October 1988, shows a dramatic drop in foreign-born farmworkers. But there were other factors at play.

There were two programs that legalized farmworkers under IRCA: the mostly urban, general legalization program and the Seasonal Agricultural Workers (SAW) Program. The latter was the much larger source of legalized farmworkers between 1986 and 1988. The National Agricultural Workers Survey shows that in 1989, at the completion of the legalization period, those legalized by the two programs combined represented 55 percent of all foreign-born farmworkers, but this apparently dropped off in the first decade after the legalization.

IRCA-Legalized as a Percent of Foreign Born Farmworkers		
1989-1991	1998-2000	2007-2009
55%	18%	17%
NAWS U.S. Department of Labor Public Use Tape		

What happened? Why did an apparently large group of the newly legalized leave in the first years after IRCA and why did the remainder stay? What many observers miss in this scenario is that this outflow was not due to IRCA but represented instead the historical pattern for U.S. farmworkers.

Due to the low wages and low number of days of work per year, many farmworkers are short-timers who just stay two or three years in agriculture. These workers become frustrated that the short-term harvest and hoeing jobs are insufficient to make a living. Many of these short-timers return to Mexico or find urban work. By contrast, other farmworkers have figured out how to make a living in the agricultural sector by piecing together many jobs or by landing a long-term job as an irrigator, skilled pruner, sprayer or semi-skilled manager of a field crop farm.

This recurring pattern of two trajectories of employment is clearly visible in the chart above. The short-timers among the newly-legalized left in the early years (as they always have done) but many others were able to figure out how to make a long time living at crop work. The percentage who reported themselves as IRCA-legalized among the foreign born dropped from 55 to 18 percent in the first years and stayed there. Those workers who left didn't leave because they were legalized; they just followed the historical pattern of workers in this industry.

Moreover, the rate at which newly legalized farmworkers left agriculture was actually considerably lower than the numbers suggest for several reasons. First, some of the legalized farmworkers who appear to have "left" according to federal research actually moved upward or elsewhere within agriculture—into employment as livestock workers, crew leaders, and farm labor contractors, or into technical jobs as mechanics, and skilled equipment operators. They weren't "lost"; their occupational migration was part of the normal (and desirable) workforce dynamics in any industry.

Furthermore, the "departure" of other farmworkers is not a result of legalization—just aging and the passage of time. Over the two-decade period after IRCA, at least 10 percent of the original cohort of seasonal agricultural workers legalized under IRCA actually "exited" agriculture because they died or became too ill to work. Taking upward mobility, mortality, and morbidity into account, it is clear that many fewer voluntarily left agriculture as a result of gaining legal status than the numbers in the chart above indicate.

What does this mean for immigration reform in 2013? In order to predict how undocumented farmworkers, legalized under comprehensive immigration reform in 2013, would behave in a future labor market, we must look at their real potential labor market mobility. The National Agricultural Workers Survey shows that nearly half (48 percent) of the foreign-born farm labor force speaks no

English at all and that more than one-third (37 percent) speaks only “a little” English. Foreign-born farmworkers’ limited education constrains their labor market mobility. Two-thirds have seven or less years of education. They will find it even more difficult than the IRCA-era farmworkers to find employment in other sectors of the economy. Today’s non-agricultural labor market is also much more demanding in terms of “foundation skills” than the post-IRCA labor market. It will be difficult for them to find better jobs elsewhere than those they have in agriculture.

The National Agricultural Workers Survey also shows that the labor market in agriculture has been stabilizing in recent years. Workers are now finding more days of work per year. This trend should hold more workers in agriculture.

If there is a mass exodus of legalized farmworkers, immigration reform will not be the cause. There are steps employers can take to reduce the loss of farmworkers who might gain legal status in 2013. They include providing health insurance, improving work conditions, coordinating with producers to provide each laborer more days per year of work, using technology to lighten the stress of the work, and providing workers career pathways within agriculture.

For more than half a century, the industry has argued for “agricultural exceptionalism.” But the data don’t show the need for special treatment. The lesson of history is that, in 2013, specialized agricultural guest worker programs are not necessary.

It isn’t a guestworker program that will allow agribusiness to thrive. Employers need to undertake serious steps toward improved personnel management (to slow turnover rather than fuel it with new influxes of workers) so as to encourage current workers to remain. At the same time, federal policy needs to allow for a limited future flow of foreign-born workers into agriculture and allow those new entrants the freedom to move wherever they are needed in the economy (not just agriculture). These steps will actually contribute more to the vitality and well-being of the U.S. agricultural sector than giving in to the familiar lobbying strategy of predicting doom.

We heartily agree with agribusiness’ call for a “market-driven” solution but we define this as one in which legal workers can move freely among employers and sectors. Paradoxically, this runs contrary to the highly bureaucratic guest worker program that agribusiness suggests.

Rick Mines has conducted research on Mexico-U.S. migration and the farm labor market for more than 40 years. After his early (1982) research on farmworker health, he reviewed the H-2A program in the mid-1980’s for GAO, developed the concept of the National Agricultural Worker Survey (NAWS) and supervised it during its first decade. He recently led a major binational study of indigenous farmworkers in California and is currently a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Guadalajara in Mexico.

*Ed Kissam in 1989-1991 led one of the first studies of post-IRCA farm labor supply and is the co-author, with David Griffith, of *Working Poor: Farmworkers in the United States*. From 2001-2006 he directed a USDA-funded national study of rural farmworker communities with high concentration of immigrants—the *New Pluralism Study*. His most recent farmworker research was a 2010 study of census undercount in low-income areas of rural California.*