

Guest Workers Critical to Michigan Agriculture

Michigan agriculture — most notably fruits and vegetables — is heavily dependent on migrant workers. The history and impact of guest workers in agriculture is very different than in other industries using foreign labor.

Did You Know?

Michigan has a 100-year history of working in partnership with workers from other places, and is **currently the nation's 4th-largest user of temporary ag labor.**

Michigan is the **2nd most agriculturally-diverse state**, behind only California. All of our fruits and vegetables must be cared for and harvested by hand, from apples to zucchini.

Specific to apples, **Michigan's family farms hand-pick over 1.5 billion apples** from Labor Day to Halloween.

Separating Fact from Fiction:

Myth: Employers pay "sweat shop" wages.

Fact: Michigan migrant fruit harvesters are considered skilled labor, and earn an average of \$8 to \$11 an hour. The hours are long because the time is short to harvest crops in peak conditions. While workers are paid by "piece work," state and federal regulations require that wages meet minimum wage standards. They always do. In addition, half of Michigan's migrant workers live free of charge in housing maintained by growers.

Myth: Employers don't ask for ID.

Fact: All ethical farm employers ask for identification and file appropriate state and federal tax documents. Asking where questionable ID was obtained often brings reprisal from a farm worker advocacy organization. By the time the Social Security Administration advises an ag employer that the Social Security number is invalid, the worker is long gone. Growers are doing the best



Fallen apples at a Sparta, Michigan farm where a lack of guest workers caused some of the fruit to go unharvested in fall 2006.

they can to ensure workers are properly identified, and want to work within the law. But a new worker identification system is needed.

Myth: *Migrant workers take jobs from Americans.*

Fact: For over 100 years, Michigan apple growers and other fruit and vegetable growers have depended on migrant workers for short-term seasonal labor. In the last 20 to 30 years, these workers have come primarily from Mexico.

An unemployed/underemployed Michigan resident is unlikely to uproot his/her family to pick asparagus for 12 hours a day in Hart for six weeks; move to Traverse City to can cherries for four weeks; to Grand Junction to pick blueberries for 6 weeks; and end the year picking apples for eight weeks in Sparta. Commuting long distances to very rural locations is also unlikely.

Growers have given up on state employment agencies and placing “help wanted” ads for locals. The chilling effect of anti-immigration rhetoric is drying up the supply of guest workers.

Lastly, Americans do not want to be laid off from November through March when Michigan migrant workers typically return to their families in Mexico.

Myth: *Agriculture is automated.*

Fact: Most crops the public sees as they drive to work, such as corn and soybeans, are mechanically harvested. However what many people don’t realize is that fruits and vegetables are hand-harvested, which requires quickly gearing up a large, temporary and skilled labor force to pick the crop at its peak condition.

Myth: *Consumers will pay more for locally-grown food.*

Fact: In reality, most consumers are highly influenced by price. Apples compete on price in a global marketplace where Michigan is a price-taker not a price-setter.

In Michigan, up to 20 percent of the state’s apple growers went out of business in the late 1990s owing to lower-priced Chinese apple juice concentrate. (China was ultimately convicted of dumping.) The consumer was unwilling — or never got the chance — to buy local. The same price was charged at retail, but grocery buyers determined to buy lower-cost inputs.

