



# CALIFORNIA FARM BUREAU FEDERATION

## FEDERAL POLICY DIVISION

2300 RIVER PLAZA DRIVE, SACRAMENTO, CA 95833-3293 • PHONE (916) 561-5610 • FAX (916) 561-5693

### **Searching for Solutions: California Farmers Continue to Struggle with Employee Shortages Agricultural Labor Availability Survey Results—2017**

Farmers in every growing region of California continue to report difficulty hiring enough employees to work in a variety of agricultural occupations—including planting, cultivating and harvesting food and other crops—according to a survey conducted by the California Farm Bureau Federation. The survey, conducted during summer 2017, showed that 55 percent of responding farmers had experienced employee shortages. Of those farmers who hire employees on a seasonal basis, 69 percent reported shortages of varying degrees. Problems have been more acute among farmers whose crops require the most intensive hand labor, such as tree fruits and grapes.

The findings are consistent with results from a similar 2012 survey conducted by CFBF, in which over half of all respondents reported shortages. In 2017, farmers again report that fewer potential employees are applying for seasonal harvest jobs, despite increased recruiting efforts, higher wages offered and other incentives.

In an effort to better understand the direct impacts and implications of the workforce shortages, CFBF posted a brief, voluntary survey on its website, [www.cfbf.com](http://www.cfbf.com), asking farmers to provide information about whether they were experiencing employee shortages, the extent of the shortages and how they had responded to any shortages they experienced. Availability of the survey was publicized in the weekly Farm Bureau newspaper, *Ag Alert*®, via email to Farm Bureau members and by individual county Farm Bureaus.

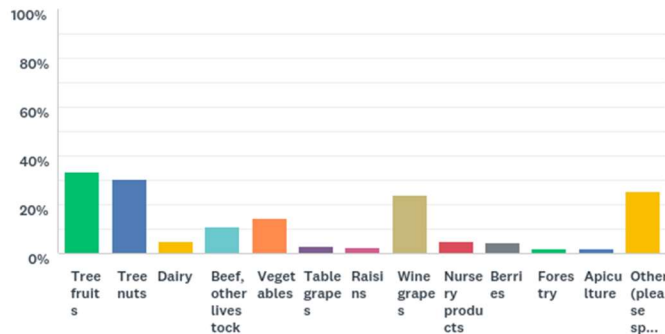
#### **In all, 762 farmers and ranchers throughout California responded to the survey.**

Survey results showed that despite raising wages, increasing benefits, converting to less labor-intensive crops, investing in mechanization and other efforts, California farm employers have experienced continued employee shortages, and have continued to alter their production practices in response to the shortages, which stem in part from a lack of agricultural labor reform at the federal level.

The survey respondents included farm employers growing a diverse range of crops and commodities across the state, including both labor-intensive crops and those that do not require significant employee involvement. A large majority of the respondents grow tree fruit, winegrapes or nuts; respondents also included growers of table grapes, vegetables, rice, wheat, corn, hay and nursery crops, as well as dairy and livestock producers.

Q2 Which of the following do you produce? (Check all that apply)

Answered: 762 Skipped: 0

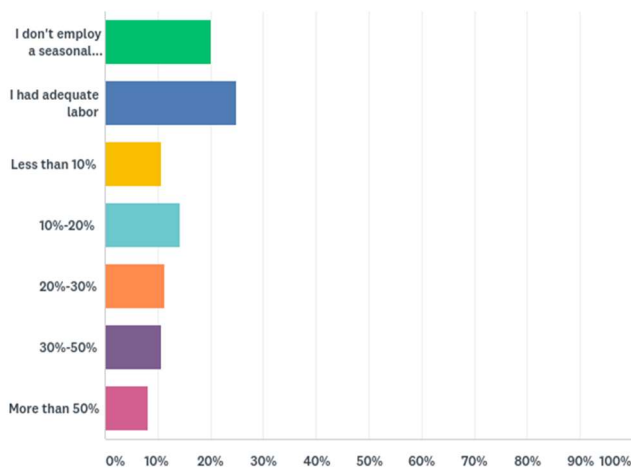


**Highlights**

- **Fifty-five percent of survey respondents said they were experiencing employee shortages** to various degrees. A majority of farmers who reported shortages said they were unable to recruit up to 50 percent of their seasonal workforce needs, with 15% unable to recruit more than 50% of employees. Of the farmers who reported shortages, the majority employ 15 or fewer people on a permanent basis and hire 50 employees or fewer during peak season. Of the farmers reporting shortages, 36 percent were tree fruit growers, and 30 percent were winegrape growers.
- **Of the survey respondents who said they employ a seasonal workforce, 69 percent said they were experiencing employee shortages.**

Q6 This past year, what percentage of your required seasonal labor workforce were you unable to recruit?

Answered: 762 Skipped: 0



- When asked what actions they have taken in response to employee shortages, one-third of respondents said they used mechanization if available; another 29 percent

attempted or investigated mechanization. One-third of respondents elected not to engage in labor-intensive cultivation activities such as pruning and grapevine canopy management. About 9.5 percent planted fewer acres and 9 percent did not harvest some of their crop. The most frequent action, taken by 49 percent of respondents, was to offer increased wages, benefits and additional incentives to prevent employees accepting work with other growers or leaving agriculture altogether.

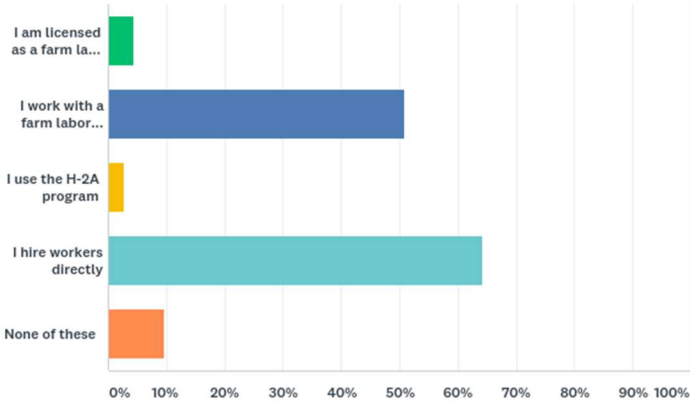
- The survey results and other information gained from farmers throughout the state indicate that though they may have been able to hire employees, those who were available were not necessarily well-skilled in the type of cultural practices needed for that particular commodity, and these lesser-skilled employees took longer to complete the work. Thus, some farmers chose not to harvest all or part of the crop.
- Comments included:
  - *“Domestic workers will not work on farms and ranches for high-paying wages, after trying to recruit them year after year. There is a constant need for a reliable workforce from the south, and if it dries up, so does farming in the USA. Then all the produce will be imported from southern countries, with little or no oversight on food safety.” - Orange County farmer*
  - *“We are being approached by businesses to purchase more of our plants. Due to the labor shortages, we have had to decline any additional business. Additionally, the labor shortage has forced us to conduct some of the tasks that normally an employee would complete. That has inhibited our operation from being properly managed and developing.” – San Diego County farmer*
- Farmers who responded to the survey grow all types of commodities produced in California; Farm Bureau did not limit the survey to those who grow labor-intensive crops. Recognizing that California farmers produce a remarkable diversity of crops in unique growing regions, it is not surprising that some respondents did not report employee shortages. Those reporting that they had an adequate number of employees grew a variety of crops with minimal labor demands during peak season, as well as more labor-intensive crops. In addition, this result could relate to the type of crop, location of the farm, available employee supply in that area or lack of competing crops at time of harvest.

## **Respondents**

Nearly 64 percent of the respondents reported they hire farm employees directly; 51 percent reported using farm labor contractors (totals add to more than 100 percent because some farmers use a combination of several hiring methods). **Fewer than 3 percent of those responding use the existing H-2A agricultural immigration program.** Farmers in California have for many years said they find the H-2A program inadequate to meet their employment needs, given the program’s high cost, bureaucratic difficulties and the diversity of seasons, workforce needs and timing of those needs, which often conflict and overlap. In spite of increases in the number of people being employed in California through the H-2A program, it still represents a small fraction of the overall agricultural labor force in the state.

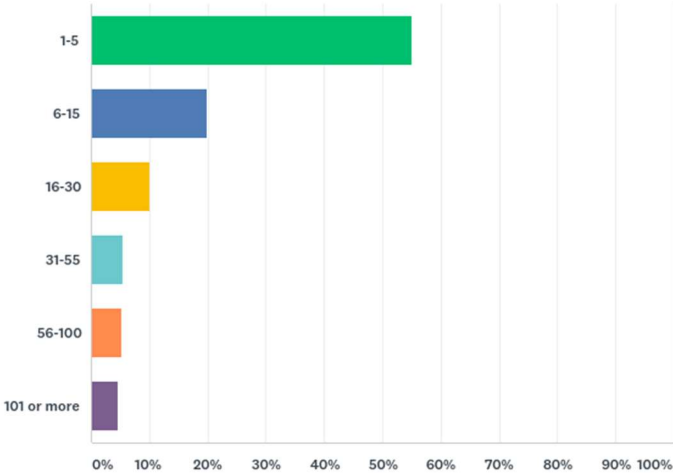
Q8 How do you meet the labor needs of your operation? Check all that apply.

Answered: 762 Skipped: 0

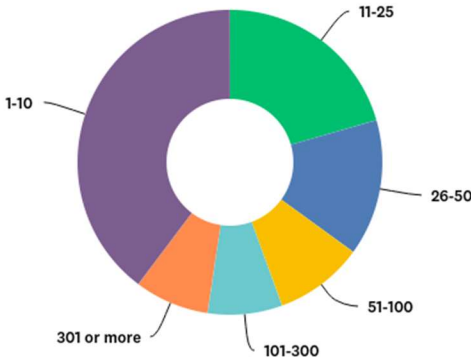


Q4 How many permanent / year-round employees do you currently employ?

Answered: 762 Skipped: 0



Q5 How many additional employees do you hire for harvest / peak season?



- Tree fruit growers represented the single largest group of respondents (33 percent), followed by tree nuts (30 percent) and those who grow winegrapes (24 percent).
- The respondents consisted of farmers and farm labor contractors.
- A majority of the respondents hire up to 25 employees during peak harvest season and employ one to 15 permanent employees throughout the year.
- In addition, 40 percent of farmers who responded said they rely on permanent employees making up more than 50 percent of their workforce. Farmers tell us they increasingly seek to retain more of their workforce year-round, and find work throughout the production process, as a way to ensure there are employees on staff for the peak harvest times.

## **New Dynamics**

1. In addition to the continued agricultural employee shortages in California since the previous survey in 2012, respondents relayed a sense of fear and anxiety among their employees, resulting from media reports about statements made and actions taken by policymakers in Washington, D.C. Those statements have focused on increased immigration law enforcement, legislation to reconfigure the demographic and employment-skills composition needed to acquire permanent and temporary visas, and making web-based electronic employment eligibility verification (E-Verify) mandatory. In addition to difficulty recruiting and retaining a workforce, agricultural employers must now contend with an atmosphere where employees increasingly worry about the potential of being stopped, detained and threatened with deportation as they travel to their jobs.

Comments included:

- *“This year, workers were very scared to move around. The new political climate is creating high level concern in the workforce and definitely lower availability of workers in high traveled and public areas for those of us in more urbanized areas.” – San Diego County farmer*
- *“Workers are afraid of immigration enforcement and deportations, so they are heading back to their countries.” – Tulare County farmer*
- *“Agricultural workers from Mexico need special blue card visas allowing them to work here and then return to Mexico when work is completed...DC needs to stop demonizing the immigrant workers.” – Sonoma County farmer*
- *“I have been using DACA students but many are leaving due to fear of being deported. In the past, I have used local farm labor but they have left or are not willing to travel for fear of being arrested. Farms that provide housing are better off for now.” – San Diego County farmer*

2. Aging Workforce: Although the survey did not ask growers for information about the median age of the current and available agricultural workforce, comments from respondents indicated the workforce is aging. When asked what new patterns employers are seeing from their employees, nearly 34 percent of respondents reported their employees retiring or cutting back on hours due to their age.

Comments included:

- *“Without an affordable and easy to use guestworker program, the labor pool for agriculture will keep shrinking, as most workers are 50 years-plus in age.” – Tehama County farmer*
- *“My crew is aging; my 15-17 permanent employees have been with me for 25-plus years and are all over 50.” – Yolo County farmer*

Q10 If you have experienced a decrease in labor availability, what new patterns have you observed from your workforce? Check all that apply.



## **Future Plans**

Due to employee shortages, farmers said their short-term plans include offering higher wages and other incentives (39 percent); planting less labor-intensive crops (16 percent); and planting fewer acres (10 percent). Some respondents indicated they are preparing to sell their land or lease parcels.

Some comments included:

- *“I produced fresh fruit until 2015. An important factor in the decision to end that enterprise was the difficulty attaining and the expense of the labor needed.” – Fresno County farmer*
- *“I had to delay harvest due to labor shortages and lost much tree fruit.” – Ventura County farmer*
- *“ICE has visited our farm in the last four years. The first time, we lost 100 of 105 employees; the second time, 57 of 70 employees I could find. We are now having to plant less acres and change to less labor-intensive crops.” – San Diego County farmer*

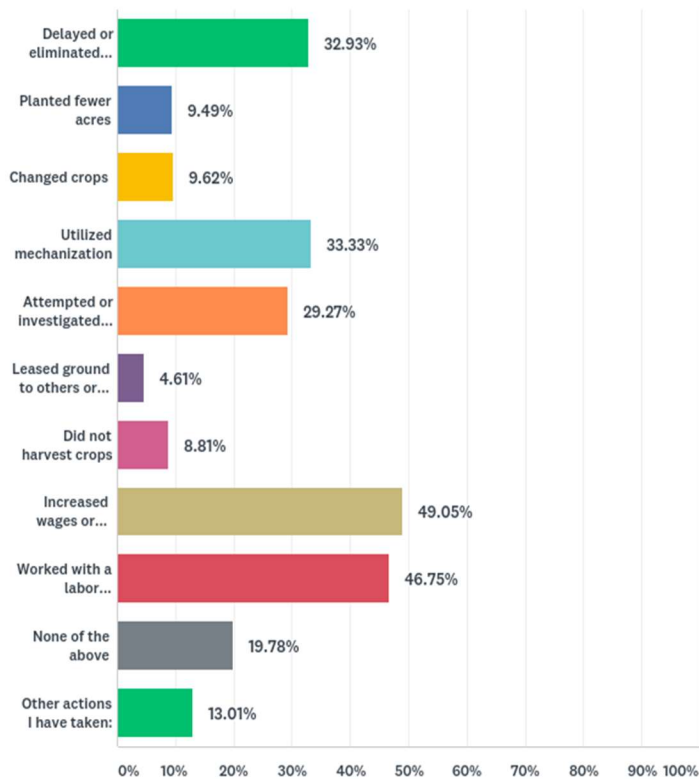
## **Mechanization**

With a continued decline in employee availability, California farmers and ranchers report they are seeking to mechanize cultivation and harvest operations, though no effective mechanization has been developed for many specialty crops. Mechanization of some crops, such as nuts, winegrapes and processing tomatoes, has been available for a number of years and is in widespread use. Farms that produce more-delicate specialty crops (e.g., fresh fruits and vegetables), depend on large numbers of field employees, though some tillage, planting, fertilization and pest control have been mechanized. Many vegetable crop seedlings (e.g., tomatoes or celery) are transplanted with hybrid human/mechanical systems, where people manually feed individual seedlings into a mechanism for placement in the soil, while the weeding and thinning of vegetable crops and the thinning of fruit crops is mostly done by hand.

Due to the shortages reported in the survey data, the largest trend among farmers and ranchers participating in the survey has been to move away from hand labor and invest in machinery, if it is available for their commodity. Nearly two-thirds of farmers surveyed reported utilizing and/or attempting to utilize some form of mechanization in their production.

Delayed or eliminated certain cultural practices	32.93%	243
-	9.49%	
Planted fewer acres		70
-	9.62%	
Changed crops		71
-	33.33%	
Utilized mechanization		246
-	29.27%	
Attempted or investigated some method of mechanized machinery		216
-	4.61%	
Leased ground to others or gave up leases		34
-	8.81%	
Did not harvest crops		65
-	49.05%	
Increased wages or offered additional benefits, including incentives		362
-	46.75%	
Worked with a labor contractor to hire additional workers		345

Q9 If you have experienced labor shortages, what actions have you taken within the last five years? Check all that apply.



## **Conclusion and Next Steps**

The responses to the voluntary CFBF survey show continued, chronic concern regarding employee shortages on California farms and ranches. The survey indicates that farmers of crops that require fewer employees and use mechanization during the peak season generally have adequate numbers of people. However, farmers who rely on peak-season hand labor and lack mechanical methods to harvest their crops continue to see employee shortages and to risk crop losses as a result.

In California alone, farmers and ranchers rely on nearly 473,000 employees during peak season. Nationally, it is estimated that the agricultural workforce consists of 2.5 million hired employees. Some have calculated that as many as 50-70 percent of the hired workers are not authorized to work in the U.S. Farmers want to hire a legal workforce, and continue to support creation of effective programs that allow people from foreign countries to enter the United States legally to harvest crops.

American agriculture is very diverse. Different regions produce different commodities with widely varying weather and cultivation and harvest times. These diverse needs cannot be addressed through a one-size-fits-all, single-program solution. Agricultural employee shortages are not confined to California or any one region. Though California is the largest producer of many of the crops grown throughout the nation—particularly labor-intensive fruit and vegetable crops—many of these same crops are grown in other states.



Farmers in California as well as throughout the United States have been forthright about the fact that they rely on a largely immigrant workforce. Efforts to hire U.S.-born employees on farms have remained unsuccessful. CFBB survey results in both 2012 and 2017 show that the federal government needs to move rapidly toward allowing a legal, immigrant workforce in the United States to guarantee that future immigrants who desire to work in American agriculture will be allowed entry. CFBB strongly opposes a mandatory E-Verify requirement on employers until a satisfactory immigration path for agriculture is realized. We also caution Congress that fixes around the edges of H-2A won't alleviate the current employee shortage. Farm Bureau and other organizations will continue to work with Congress to create a secure, flexible, market-based agricultural immigration program.