

THE STATUS OF CITRUS LABOR

Retaining high-skilled harvest workers

By Skyler Simnitt, Gulcan Onel and Derek Farnsworth

In an environment where citrus is still mainly harvested by hand and skilled domestic workers are harder to employ, employers increasingly rely on the H-2A guest-worker program to establish and retain a reliable and efficient workforce. It is estimated that guest workers now account for 80 percent or more of all citrus harvest workers each season, indicating a trend reversal from utilizing predominantly domestic workers toward recruiting H-2A workers.

Relatively little is known about this new stream of foreign workers. Where do they come from? What social, demographic and economic background do they possess? And, what does it take to retain these skilled workers in the job for future harvest seasons? The answers to these questions are crucial for citrus growers to correctly identify factors affecting worker retention or attrition and reduce potential inefficiencies resulting from high turnover rates.

SURVEY STUDIES CITRUS WORKERS

A team of researchers from the University of Florida (UF) led by Gulcan Onel has sought to identify employer characteristics and external factors that are most important to Florida citrus workers as they consider whether or not to return to work for the same employer in subsequent harvest seasons. During spring 2016, the UF team conducted a survey of citrus harvest workers in Collier, DeSoto, Hendry, Highlands, Indian River, Okeechobee, Polk and Pasco counties in Florida.

The survey included questions similar to those found in the Department of Labor's National Agriculture Workers Survey. Question topics covered demographic background, compensation, experience, legal status in the country, productivity and job satisfaction. The research has resulted in a large random sample of 307 citrus harvest workers across the state of Florida.

The survey was authorized by the UF Internal Review

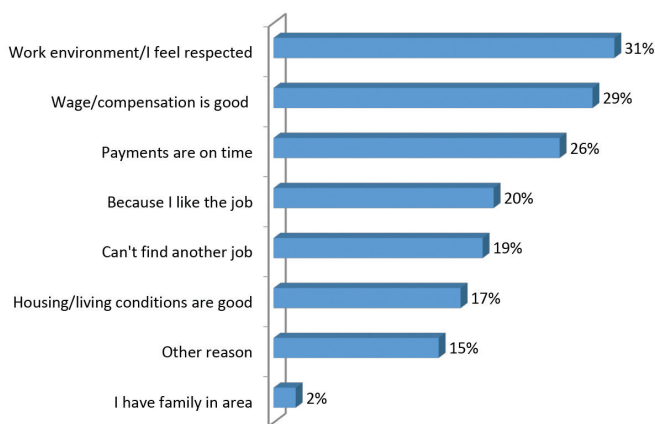
Board. As such, the survey was kept strictly anonymous. In order to increase quality of responses, workers were compensated for their participation and were interviewed outside of work hours — typically at their dwellings on their day off or after work hours — to minimize potential time and supervisory pressures.

The majority of those interviewed were relatively young, averaging 34 years old. The average age was mainly driven by the H-2A workers; domestic workers were an average of 46 years old. The age difference between guest workers and domestic workers was also the main determinant of their productivity differences. Specifically, domestic workers on average picked 0.84 tubs per hour, while productivity of H-2A workers was slightly higher at 0.94 tubs per hour.

Almost all workers in the sample, except for a few wives who worked along with their spouses, were male. A majority of the survey participants were born in Mexico (91 percent), spoke little or no English (73 percent), were married (75 percent) and had two children on average.

Survey participants had an average of 20 years of experience in agriculture and 11 years of experience specifically in citrus. Eighty-one percent of the interviewees had identified themselves as guest workers under the H-2A program, 14

Reasons for wanting to work for the same employer next season



percent indicated they were undocumented migrants, and only 5 percent held permanent residency (a.k.a. the “green card”) or citizenship. These estimates are consistent with the recent decline in newcomer Mexican migrants to the United States and point to a structural transformation in the Florida citrus labor market toward hiring predominantly authorized seasonal guest workers instead of domestic workers. The estimates also confirm the common notion that permanent

residents and citizens of the United States simply do not seem to be interested in harvest work.

REASONS TO RETURN

The survey feedback on job satisfaction or retention was based on the survey question “If offered, would you come back to work for the same employer next harvest season?” Then, the worker was asked to qualify his response by selecting from a list of proposed reasons, including compensation, work environment, whether or not the worker had family living in the area, economic conditions back home and other reasons. Workers also had the opportunity to provide their own written answer if none of the given set of options suited their personal situation.

When asked if they would return to work with the same employer next harvest season if invited, the majority of survey participants (81 percent) answered “yes,” 4 percent indicated “no,” and 15 percent indicated “maybe.” The two most common reasons workers gave for wanting to return to work for the same employer were satisfaction with the work environment/feeling respected (31 percent) and satisfaction with the compensation.

More specifically, 29 percent cited good/fair wages and 26 percent cited the consistency and timeliness of paychecks as motivating factors. Seventeen percent suggested the quality of life/housing was a major factor for wanting to come back next season, while 19 percent indicated that the reason they would like to return was not being able to find another job. Twenty percent of respondents indicated another reason for wanting to come back was simply because they “like the job.” Only 2 percent of workers willing to return suggested it was due to having family in the area.

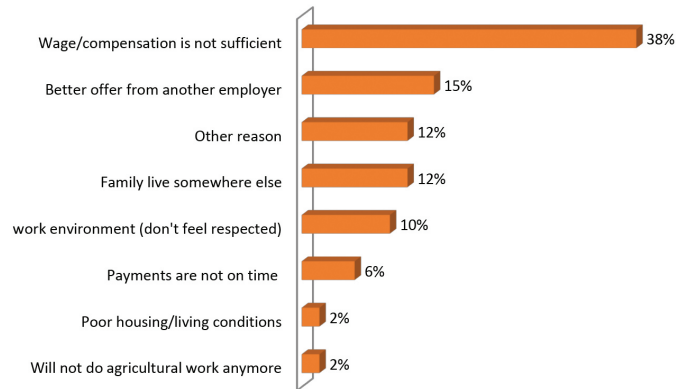
Among those that selected “other reason,” eight workers referred to the economic conditions in Mexico, either mentioning that it was difficult to find a job there or commenting on the general state of the Mexican economy. Additionally, six individuals simply wrote, “I need the job.”

WHY WORKERS WOULDN'T RETURN

Of those individuals who responded with “no” or “maybe” to the same question (“If offered, would you come back to work for the same employer next harvest season?”), 38 percent indicated “insufficient wages” as a major reason for not wanting to return to work for the same employer in upcoming seasons. Fifteen percent indicated a better job offer from a different employer, and 12 percent indicated family living far away as reasons for not returning in the future.

Furthermore, 6 percent of those who answered “no” or “maybe” indicated that their pay was unsteady or unreliable to be made on time, and 2 percent reported poor housing/living conditions as a significant driver for not willing to repeat work for the same employer. Only 2 percent of workers who indicated they would not come back to work for the same employer stated “leaving agriculture all together” as a reason.

Reasons for NOT wanting to work for the same employer next season



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In summary, the findings suggest that retention rates are high. The two factors most commonly cited by workers for why they would return next season to work for the same employer are work environment and compensation. Nearly a third of workers interviewed indicated that the main reason they were satisfied with their current employer was because they felt respected and they had a positive work environment. Another third of workers indicated they were satisfied with their pay rate and the consistency of paychecks. However, about a fifth of workers suggested the main reason for returning to the same employer/job was not being able to find a better job.

As employers seek to keep their skilled harvest crews staffed and plan ahead for future seasons, they need to consider improving any factors under their control that may decrease workers’ desire to stay with them. The quantitative findings suggest that employers can significantly improve retention of their workers by making sure they get paid on time and by creating a positive environment where workers feel respected, treated fairly, and provided good living conditions and housing conditions — a federal requirement for H-2A employers.

Apart from being significant factors for long-term farm profitability, obstacles to job satisfaction and issues in retention of skilled workers are also relevant policy matters signaling the necessary changes to be made for an improved federal guest-worker program. This research shows that growers and workers share the same desire for consistency and predictability in employment. An improved guest-worker program has the potential to satisfy the needs of both growers and workers while ensuring the rights of both domestic and guest workers are protected. 🍊

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