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Farmworkers in Michigan:
From Dialogue to Action**

by René Pérez Rosenbaum
Department of Resource Development
Michigan State University

Working Paper No. 39
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Executive Summary

Migrant and seasonal farmworkers are an important part of agricultural production in Michigan. Although important to agriculture, as a group they continue to be one of the most disadvantaged in Michigan and in the country. This report profiles the farm labor use patterns in Michigan and the benefits of farm labor to Michigan agriculture and rural areas. The report also profiles the migrant and seasonal farmworker population in the state, identifies some of the current pressing issues and problems of the population, and suggests ways to stabilize the agricultural labor market in the state.

More specific findings of this study are:

In 1997, 96,000 hired and contract farmworkers were hired on 40% of all of Michigan's 46,000 farms. Expenditures for hired and contract labor accounted for 14% of Michigan's total food production expenses.

A great majority of the hired farmworkers works a relatively short period of time; 78% of the 96,000 farmworkers hired in Michigan farms worked less than 150 days.

Farmworkers employment is concentrated in the larger farms. Five percent of the farms with hired farm labor expenses of \$100,000 or more accounted for 61% of all labor expenditures. By contrast, 70% of the farms with labor expenses in the range of \$1 to \$9,999 accounted for only 5% of all hired labor expenditures. In the case of contract labor, the farms with labor expenses of \$100,000 or more, which represent 1% of the total, accounted for 44% of all contract labor expenditures.

Farm labor use in the state is concentrated in the southwestern part of the state. The 11 largest users of farm labor accounted for 50% all hired labor. Ten counties account for 80% of all migrant workers in the state.

Sales of Michigan crops where migrant and seasonal farmworkers work continue to increase. Between 1987 and 1997, sales for vegetables increased by 34%, fruits rose by 41%, and nursery and greenhouse products rose by 120%.

An estimated 45,000 migrant farmworkers worked in the production and harvest of 45 crops that had an estimated field value of \$2 billion. Today's migrants spend the majority of their earned income in Michigan. In 2000, the state's economy gained \$34 million in Federal government transfer payments for programs to service the migrant and seasonal population in the state.

Seventy to 75% of the 45,000 migrants in the state come from Texas and Mexico. Another 25% comes from Florida and the remainder comes from other states. The overwhelming majority is of Mexican origin. Adults average a sixth grade education.

The earnings situation of migrant and seasonal farmworkers is not much better than that of other farmworkers in the United States. Michigan's hired farmworkers did better than other farmworkers in the country, but still reported weekly earnings equal to 69% the earnings of U.S. wage and salary workers. Migrant farmworkers had weekly earnings equal to 57% that of wage and salary workers.

Housing and health continue to be major concerns of the migrant and seasonal farmworker population. Other concerns include immigration issues, discrimination, wage complaints, employment disputes, access to service programs, and others.

As is the case nationally, Michigan's agricultural labor market trends point to an oversupply of agricultural labor in the state, with a larger proportion of undocumented workers. The report concludes with recommendation for stabilizing this workforce, including:

- 1) Extending the same protections afforded all working people under existing labor state laws and regulations,
- 2) Enforcing state labor laws more effectively and improving farmworker access to the justice system,
- 3) Promoting better wages, benefits, and working and housing conditions to attract and stabilize the agricultural labor force.

Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers in Michigan: From Dialogue to Action

Introduction

“If independent, family-sized farms are to be able to pay themselves a middle class income for their labor, they cannot compete fairly with large farms that rely on hired farmworkers at government-sanctioned low wage levels. Farmworkers should be treated fairly and be provided just compensation for their labor and the same protections afforded all working people under existing labor laws and regulations.”

USDA National Commission on Small Farms, 1999¹

“This nation’s choices, policies and opportunities regarding the situation of migrant and seasonal farmworkers will undoubtedly come under international scrutiny in the coming years. The failure to formulate effective policies and provide government assistance to help those in need is not justifiable and will simply not withstand close examination along the lines of Helsinki and other international commitments. If the United States does not show significant improvement in this area, then we must be prepared to answer why, not only to the nations of the world but, more importantly, to our own people.”

United States Helsinki Commission Report on “Migrant Farmworkers in the United States,” 1993²

Migrants comprise 42% of the U.S. crop farm labor force and are critical for harvesting and other short-term tasks (U.S. Department of Labor, 1994). Without migrant farmworkers, many agricultural employers, particularly those in the fresh fruit, nut, and vegetable industries, would not find enough workers to produce their crops. Yet, as the quotes above from a national and an international commission respectively suggest, these workers continue to be one of the most disadvantaged groups in the United States. The National Agricultural Worker Survey 1997-1998 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2000) revealed that between 1987 and 1997 the demographic and employment characteristics of farmworkers had changed substantially for the worse. Only in a few areas had working conditions

improved. The data show, for example, that there was a modest increase in the number of farmworkers who reported having access in the fields to toilets, as well as to potable water for drinking and washing. But by most measures, farmworkers were economically worse off in 1998 than they were in 1989, and their health status did not show relative improvement:

- ◆ The average work year has been declining; farmworkers found fewer weeks of employment in 1998 than in 1989.³
- ◆ Since 1989, the average nominal hourly wage of farmworkers has risen by only 18% (from \$5.24 to \$6.18), about one-half of the 32% increase for nonagricultural workers.⁴
- ◆ Adjusted for inflation, the average real hourly wage of farmworkers (in 1998 dollars) dropped from \$6.89 to \$6.18, causing an 11% loss in their purchasing power over the last decade.⁵
- ◆ The majority of farmworkers (61%) continue to have incomes below the poverty level.⁶
- ◆ Farmworkers were less likely to utilize public assistance programs designed to help ameliorate the effect of poverty on the working poor. Only 20% of all farmworkers reported having received unemployment insurance and only 10% reported receiving benefits from the WIC program in both 1994-1995 and 1997-98.⁷
- ◆ Medicaid and food stamps use was on the decline: 15% of all interviewed in 1994-95 reported receiving Medicaid and food stamps versus 13 and 10% respectively, in 1997-98.⁸
- ◆ Farmworkers suffer higher incidences than other wage earners of heat stress, dermatitis, influenza, pneumonia, urinary tract infections; pesticide related illnesses, and tuberculosis. They suffer from the highest rate of toxic chemical injuries of any workers in the United States.⁹
- ◆ Children of migrant farmworkers have higher rates of parasitic infections, malnutrition and dental disease and are less likely to be fully immunized than other children.¹⁰

The relative lower wages, high unemployment and under-employment, low annual income and hazardous work conditions exhibited in the U.S. agricultural labor market in the last decade, are symptomatic and indicators of an oversupply of labor (U.S. Department of Labor, 2000). Indeed, study after study has found there is no shortage of farmworkers in the United States. As the General Accounting Office concluded in December 1997, “A sudden widespread farm labor shortage requiring the importation of large number of foreign workers is unlikely to occur in the near future. There appears to be no national agricultural labor shortage now” (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1998). Spot shortages in labor have been reported in crops here or there, but in general, an oversupply of farm labor exists in labor-intensive agricultural areas across the country, including Michigan.

Another indicator of the oversupply of labor is the instability of the workforce in the agricultural labor market. Workers exit farm labor in search of jobs paying higher wages, offering more hours of work, and offering more steady and better benefits. The high turnover in agricultural labor fuels the growing proportion of the workforce that is undocumented. These patterns impact the predictability and reliability of both the labor supply and the availability of work to domestic workers. They have caught the attention of the U.S. Department of Labor which is considering various approaches to stabilize the agricultural workforce. One proposal calls for increasing wages and improving working conditions in farm jobs by normalizing legal protections for farmworkers and increasing mechanization (U.S. Department of Labor, 2000).

GLOSSARY

<i>Farm</i>	Any place from which \$1,000 or more of agricultural products were produced and sold, or normally would have been sold during the census year.
<i>Hired labor/farmworkers</i>	Persons who did farmwork for cash wages or salary.
<i>Contract labor/workers</i>	Workers furnished on a contract basis by a labor contractor, crew leader, or agricultural service firm.
<i>Migrant farmworkers</i>	Farmworkers who stay away from home overnight to do temporary or seasonal farmwork. They can be either hired or contract workers.
<i>Paid farm labor</i>	Includes both hired and contract labor.
<i>Seasonal farmworkers</i>	a) workers who work in agriculture less than 150 days a year; b) workers who are permanent residents of the communities where they do agricultural work.
<i>Market value of product sold</i>	The gross market value before taxes and producing expenses of all agricultural products sold or removed from the farm.
<i>Farm production expenses</i>	Expenses are limited to those incurred in the operation of the farm business.
<i>Farm labor, farmworkers and agricultural workers</i>	Hired or contract labor. Terms are used interchangeably in this study.
<i>Hired farm labor expenses</i>	Includes gross salaries and wages, commissions, dismissal pay, vacation pay, paid bonuses to hired workers and supplemental costs for benefits.
<i>Labor-intensive agriculture</i>	Includes vegetables, fruits, nuts, berries, horticultural and greenhouse commodities.
<i>Real income</i>	Income adjusted for inflation.
<i>Nominal income</i>	Income unadjusted for inflation.

The national and international sources of labor for use in Michigan's agricultural markets makes it difficult to isolate the Michigan market from the national and international influences and over supply conditions in which it operates. The information presented in this report profiles the patterns of farm labor use in Michigan and the benefits to Michigan agriculture and rural areas. The report also profiles the migrant and seasonal farmworker population in the state and identifies some of the current pressing issues and problems of the population. The concluding section provides some policy considerations aimed at bringing greater stability to the agricultural labor markets in Michigan.

Farm Labor and Michigan Agriculture

Paid farm labor is an essential production input on many Michigan farms. Expenditures for hired and contract workers are often used as indicators of farm labor use (Runyan, 2000). In 1997, nearly 40% of Michigan's 46,000 farms spent nearly \$400 million on hired and contract labor. This represents 14% of Michigan's total farm production expenses for 1997, which were in excess of \$2.8 billion (Table 1). By comparison, 19% of Michigan's total farm production expenditures were spent on commercial fertilizer, agricultural chemicals, and petroleum products combined (1997 U.S. Census of Agriculture).

The overwhelming majority of farms using paid labor relied on labor hired directly by farm operators rather than on contract workers, who are furnished by labor contractors, crew leaders, or organized service firms. Farms that hired workers directly accounted for 79% of all farms using paid labor and 93% of all farm labor expenses (Table 1).

The concentration of hired and contract labor in the larger farms, a pattern of farm labor use is observable at both the national and state level. Fewer and fewer farms are growing these agricultural commodities on more and more acreage. Nationally, the largest 4% of the farms using hired labor accounted for 64% of all hired farm labor expenditures while only 3% of the farmers using contract labor accounted for 70% of the contract labor expenditures (1997 U.S. Census of Agriculture). In Michigan, 5% of the farms with hired farm labor expenses of \$100,000 or more accounted for 61% of all labor expenditures. By contrast, the 70% of the farms that accounted for labor expenses in the range of \$1 to \$9,000, accounted for only 5% of all hired labor expenditures. In the case of contract labor, the farms with labor expenses of \$100,000 or more, which represent 1% of the total, accounted for 44% of all contract labor expenditures. By contrast, farms with contract labor expenditures of less than \$10,000, which represented 89% of all farms using contract labor, accounted for 23% of all contract labor expenditures (Table 2).

Table 1. Paid Farm Labor—Farms, Production Expenses in Michigan, 1997

	<i>FARM</i>		<i>PRODUCTION EXPENSES</i>	
	Number	%	\$	%
All Michigan farms	46,040	100	(x)	(x)
Farms using paid labor	18,346	40	(x)	(x)
Using hired labor	14,481	32	(x)	(x)
Using contract labor	3,865	8	(x)	(x)
<i>Farms using hired labor/farms using paid labor</i>		79	(x)	(x)
Total farm production expenses (\$1,000)	(x)	(x)	2,835,658	100
Total labor expenses	(x)	(x)	398,188	14
Hired labor expenses	(x)	(x)	369,145	13
Contract labor expenses	(x)	(x)	29,043	1
<i>Hired farm expenses /paid labor expenses</i>	(x)	(x)		93

Source: 1997 U. S. Census of Agriculture

Table 2. Hired Farm Labor and Contract Labor Farms and Expenditures in Michigan, 1997				
	<i>FARM</i>		<i>PRODUCTION EXPENSES</i>	
	Number	%	\$	%
Hired Farm Labor - All Farms	14,481	100		
Hired Farm Labor - All Expenses			369,145	100
Farms with farm labor expenses of \$1 to \$9,999	10,144	70	18,098	5
Farms with labor expenses of \$10 to \$99,999	3,640	25	125,074	34
Farms with labor expenses of \$100,000 or more	697	5	225,975	61
<i>Farms with labor expenses of \$500,000 or more</i>	87	.5	107,354	29
Contract Labor - All Farms	3,865	100		
Contract Labor - All Expenses			29,043	100
Farms with farm labor expenses of \$1 to \$9,000	3,454	89	6,621	23
Farms with labor expenses of \$10 to \$49,999	334	9	7,043	24
Farms with labor expenses of \$50,000 or more	77	2	15,378	53
Farms with labor expenses of \$100,000 or more	37	1	12,840	44

Source: 1997 U. S. Census of Agriculture

The length of the employment relationship is a central characteristic of the agricultural labor market; a great majority of the hired farmworkers works a relatively short period (Table 3). Census data on the number of days worked by hired farmworkers have served as the basis for defining seasonal workers as those that work less than 150 days and regular workers as those that work 150 days or more. In 1997, 78% of the nearly 96,000 farmworkers hired in Michigan farms worked less than 150 days. These seasonal workers worked in over 90% of all the farms using hired workers. The remaining 22% of the hired farmworkers were regular workers who worked on 42% of the farms using hired farm labor.

Another characteristic of farm labor use in the state is its concentration by geographic location. Although the hired farmworker population is found

in nearly every Michigan county, the bulk of this workforce is concentrated in a limited number, many in the western part of the state. Table 4 below shows the 24 counties in the state that registered at least 1,000 seasonal workers and the number of farms involved. These 24 counties accounted for 70% of the seasonal workers and 56% of the farms using hired farm labor. Eleven of the state's counties accounted for 50% of all seasonal farmworkers in the state and for 31% of the farms using this labor.

Although the employment relationship is often the basis for defining seasonal farmworkers, labor law and a variety of agricultural labor programs define seasonal labor on the basis of permanent residency. Such a definition distinguishes seasonal workers from migrant farmworkers who leave an agricultural areas once the production season is over (Roka, Fritz & Emerson, 1999).

Table 3. Hired Farm Labor - Workers by Days Worked in Michigan, 1997				
Workers by Days Worked	<i>Days Worked</i>		<i>Farms</i>	
	Number	%	Number	%
Less than 150 Days	74,869	78	13,069	90
150 Days or More	20,996	22	6,074	42
Total Hired Farm Labor	95,865	100		
<i>Farms with Hired Farm Labor</i>			14,481*	100*

Source: 1997 U. S. Census of Agriculture

*Note: Numbers and percentages do not add up because some farms utilized both types of labor.

Table 4. Use of Hired Seasonal Farm Labor in Michigan Farms, Selected Counties, 1997

	<i>WORKERS</i>		<i>FARMS</i>	
	Number	Percent Cumulative	\$	Percent Cumulative
Van Buren	6,927	9	431	3
Ottawa	6,230	18	540	7
Berrien	4,671	24	428	11
Kent	4,643	30	458	14
Oceana	3,258	34	257	16
Allegan	3,041	38	398	19
Tuscola	2,046	41	376	22
Kalamazoo	1,893	44	250	24
Huron	1,556	46	432	27
Lapeer	1,513	48	317	30
Mason	1,485	50	128	31
Leelanau	1,448	52	200	32
Gratiot	1,431	54	276	43
Monroe	1,392	55	298	36
Bay	1,378	57	229	38
Montcalm	1,369	59	289	40
Ionia	1,254	61	267	42
Lenawee	1,234	62	303	45
Ingham	1,199	64	227	46
Muskegon	1,155	66	115	47
Salinac	1,144	67	361	50
Clinton	1,112	69	301	52
Branch	1,026	70	230	54
Saginaw	1,097	71	250	56
	•	•	•	•
State	74,869	100	13,069	100

Source: MSD/MFIA webpage
<http://www.mfia.state.mi.us/CFSAadmin/adult/migrant/stats.html>

Michigan is one of the nation's most diverse agricultural states. It grows over 100 commercial crops, second only to California in variety (Michigan Employment Agency, 2002). For certain crops to be harvested each year, the state's seasonal workforce must be supplemented by out of state and out of country seasonal migrants. Fruit, vegetable, and horticulture specialty industries, for example, rely on sizeable numbers of migrant farmworkers to harvest crops and perform various tasks during critical planting and harvest seasons. In 2000, the Michigan migrant workforce worked in the production and harvest of 45 crops that had an estimated field value of \$2 billion (Table 5).

Even though much of Michigan's farm production is highly mechanized, the production of fruits, vegetable, and horticultural specialties is largely dependent on hand labor. Workers on these farms perform a wide range of jobs, including planting, pruning, thinning, hoeing, irrigating, fertilizing, potting, transplanting, packing, shipping, and others. However, more workers are involved in harvesting the crop than in any other activity. Labor for harvesting these highly perishable crops is needed at exact time periods to prevent deterioration of the crop (MSD/FIA, 2000).

While the national total number of hired and contract farmworkers is believed to have slightly decreased from 1989 to 1997, the share of farmworkers employed in labor-intensive agriculture may have actually increased (Department of Labor, 2000). The tremendous growth in the labor-intensive agricultural sector supports this proposition. Sales of labor-intensive commodities have increased significantly between 1987 and 1997, both nationally and in Michigan. At the national level, market sales of vegetables, fruits, nuts, and berries rose by 79% and nursery and greenhouse products rose 90%. In Michigan, sales for vegetables increased by 34%, fruits rose by 41%, and nursery and greenhouse products rose 120% (1997 U.S. Census of Agriculture).

Farm Labor and Rural Economic Development

Nearly half a century ago, Gov. Mennen William's Michigan Study Commission on Migratory Labor recognized the importance of migrant farmworkers to the state of Michigan. The Commission noted in 1954, that Michigan ranked high in the nation in the production of various fruits and vegetables and that Michigan farmers needed migrant workers to maintain its productive record. The Commission's report further noted that migrant workers spent most of their earnings in Michigan in communities where they worked and that local communities benefited from the presence of migratory workers, much as they did from tourists and vacationists (State of Michigan, 1954).

Table 5. Michigan Crops on Which Migrants Work, 2000

<i>COMMODITY</i>	<i>NATIONAL RANK</i>	<i>MICHIGAN PRODUCTION (IN 1,000S)</i>	<i>UNITS</i>	<i>VALUE OF PRODUCTION (IN 1,000S)</i>
Beans, Dry, Black	1	840	CWT	11,676 ¹
Beans Dry Cranberry	1	380	CWT	52,82 ¹
Blueberries	1	62,000	LBS	55,140
Cherries, Tart	1	200,000	LBS	36,370
Cucumbers, Processing	1	180	TONS	38,700
Geraniums	1	22,383	POTS	22,039
Hosta	1	3,156	POTS	9,451
Beans, Dry, Navy	1	1,800	CWT	25,020 ¹
Beans, Dry Light Red Kidney	1	285	CWT	3,962 ¹
Impatiens	1	2,403	FLATS	16,364
Petunias	1	1,651	FLATS	10,484
Grapes, Niagara	1	19	TONS	5,290
Marigolds	1	784	FLATS	5,394
Beans, Dry Small Red	2	113	CWT	1,571
Celery	2	950	CWT	12,369
Beans, Dry, Dark Red Kidney	2	182	CWT	2,530 ¹
Carrots, Fresh	3	1,260	CWT	16,884
Beans, Snaps, Processing	3	92	TONS	14,678
Apples	3	850,000	LBS	75,953
Asparagus	3	283	CWT	18,075
Grapes, Concord	3	65	TONS	17,867
Radishes	3	175	CWT	4,760
Vegetable Type Bedding Plants	3	720	NUMBER	5,033
Cherries, Sweet	4	20	TONS	9,520
Carrots, Processing	4	35	TONS	2,408
Cucumbers, Fresh	4	1,340	CWT	25,192
Tomatoes, Processing	4	84	TONS	6,804
Plums	4	4	TONS	861
Sugarbeets	4	3,403	TONS.	115,915 ³
Pumpkins	5	704	CWY	26,752
Squash	6	610	CWT	9,333
Mushrooms	7	11,637	LBS	14,923
Potatoes	10	14,963	CWT	102,447
Soybeans	10	74,880	BUSHELS	355,680
Corn for Grain	11	244,280	BUSHELS	464,132
Wheat, Winter	15	36,000	BUSHELS	75,600
Hay, All	17	4,330	TONS	271,400
Bell Pepper	NR2	462	CWT	10,395
Pears	NR2	5,200	TONS	1,402
Sweet Corn	NR2	742	CWT	13,430
Cantaloupes, Fresh	NR2	105	CWT	1,607
Strawberries	NR2	90	CWT	6,712
Tomatoes, Fresh	NR2	408	CWT	18,115
Peaches	NR2	47,500	LBS	11,340
Onions	NR2	945	CWT	9,450
45 Crops		(Field value of Crops \$2.0 billion)		\$1,968,310

1 Marketing year average of \$13.90

2 Not Ranked

3 Value of Production is from 1999, which is the latest information that is available for this product.

Note: Value of crops from the field to the consumer \$10.5 billion (2.1 x factor of 5). Factor includes processing, storage, packing, transportation, broker, wholesaler, retailer, advertising, and consumer.

Source: MSD/MFIA, November 2001.

Table 6. Federal and State Funding for Migrant and Seasonal Farmworker Programs, Michigan, 2001

<i>PROGRAM</i>	<i>FEDERAL \$</i>	<i>STATE \$</i>
Migrant Employment training	\$1,000,000	0
Community Health Centers	4,141,018	0
Office of Migrant education	8,900,000	0
Migrant Head Start	8,900,000	0
Migrant Housing Assistance	600,000	\$1,000,000
FIA Migrant Program	8,000,000	1,500,000
Farm Worker Legal Services	500,000	50,000
Michigan Migrant Legal Assistance Program	15,000	250,000
Michigan Department of Career Development ¹	2,300,000	0
TOTAL	34,356,018	2,800,000
<i>Federal and State Funding: \$37,156,018</i>		

Source: Manuel Gonzales, MSD/FIA, Feb. 19, 2002.

¹ Rick Olivarez, Feb. 19, 2002.

The interpretation of farmworkers in rural areas as an economic development event has been increasingly recognized as an important aspect of the contributions farmworkers make to the places where they work (Rosenbaum, 2001; Adams & Severson, 1986; Sills, Erin, Alwang & Driscoll, 1993). Today's 45,000 migrant farmworkers spend between 50% to 75% of their wages in Michigan. Since the 1960's, local economies have also benefited from the various federal and state programs that have since been established to address the problems of migrant workers. Table 6 shows that over \$34 million from the federal government entered Michigan during the 2001 fiscal year to service this population. Because of these program expenditures, and farmworker household expenditures, the local business sector, as well as the education, health, and housing sectors of local economies benefit from the presence of farmworkers in the state.

Profile of Migrant Farmworkers in Michigan

Michigan growers have relied on Mexican Americans from Texas and Mexicans to meet their highly seasonal labor demand for nearly a century (Valdés, 1991). This historical sending – receiving relationship between communities in Michigan and communities in Texas and Mexico continues to this day, despite changes in both farmworkers and the crops they help sustain. It is a key reason why 70 to 75% of the current migrant population considers Texas and Mexico as its place of origin (Table 7).

The estimated total of farmworkers needed to perform seasonal agricultural work for the 2001-1997 time period was 50,300 (Michigan Employment Agency, 2002). The Migrant Services Program for Michigan estimated the migrant agricultural labor force at 45,000 in 1997, making Michigan the nation's fifth largest user of transient migrant workers (MSD/FIA, 1997). The number of migrant farmworkers has been relatively constant for nearly 15 years, but has decreased slightly the last three years (Gonzalez, 2002). With a workforce of 45,000 and an average family size of 3.4, the migrant population is estimated at about 153,000. In a separate report, Farm Labor Legal Services Inc., estimated the migrant and seasonal farmworkers and their dependents at 160,000 people (Michigan State Bar Foundation FLS Final Report, 1999).

The earnings situation of farmworkers in Michigan, generally speaking, is not much better than that of farmworkers in the U.S. Table 8 compares the weekly earnings of Michigan farmworkers to all other farmworkers in the country and to all U.S. wage and salary workers. Between 1995 and 1998, Michigan hired farmworkers had a relative increase in weekly earnings compared to U.S. hired farmworkers. Where as in 1995 weekly earnings were about the same, by 1998 the weekly earnings of Michigan farmworkers were 21% higher. The weekly earnings of Michigan farmworkers has also been increasing compared to all U.S. wage and salary workers, but wages of Michigan farmworkers are considerably lower. In 1995, weekly earnings

Table 7. Profile of Michigan's Migrant Agricultural Labor Force, 1997

ITEM	MEASURE
Number:	Approximately 45,000
Race Composition:	98% Mexican-American 1% White 1% Black
Average Family Size:	3.5 Persons
Origin	70% from Texas and Mexico 25% from Florida 5% from other states
Average Annual Income	\$7,500 for family of four
Education	Adults - 6th Grade Youth - 9th Grade

Source: MSD/FIA, 2001

were 62% of those earned by all U.S. wage and salary workers. This increased to 69% by 1998. In the case of Michigan field workers, a subset of hired farmworkers, weekly earnings remained lower than those of Michigan hired farmworkers. However, the weekly earnings of Michigan field workers were higher than those of U.S. farmworkers overall, and the gap between the two groups widened. Migrants had the lowest weekly earnings of all farmworker groups. Their weekly earnings in 1997 was equal to 88% of those earned by Michigan farmworkers and to 57% of all U.S. wage and salary workers.

Table 9. Migrant Farmworker Population in Michigan, 1985¹¹

COUNTY	EST. MIGRANT POPULATION	% OF TOTAL
Berrien	9,317	20.2
Van Buren	8,378	18.2
Kent	5,367	11.6
Oceana	3,804	8.2
Bay	2,038	4.4
Manistee	1,839	4.0
Ottawa	1,758	3.8
Allegan	1,674	3.6
Leelanau	1,386	3.0
Ionia	1,062	2.3
Sum (Top 10 Counties)	36,623	79.3
Total (All Counties)	46,126	100.0

Source: MSD/FIA, 1997

Data on the legal status of Michigan farmworkers are hard to come by. National statistics indicate that 52% of hired farmworkers lacked work authorization, 22% were citizens and 24% were legal permanent residents (Department of Labor, 2000). The remaining 2% comprised individual with temporary work permits, including foreign students, refugees and asylees, and persons who had pending applications. Anecdotal data on the legal status of Michigan farmworkers suggest that the proportion of farmworkers who lacked work authorization varies by place and ranged from 30% to 80%.

Table 8. Average Weekly Earnings, Michigan and U.S. Farmworkers, and U.S. Wage and Salary Workers

	1995	1996	1997	1998
All Michigan Hired Farmworkers ¹	265	278	285	315
Michigan Fields Workers ²	256	269	271	295
Michigan Migrant Workers ³			250	
All U.S. Farmworkers ⁴	257	260	254	260
All U.S. Wage & Salary Workers ⁵ Workers	428	430	439	456
Michigan Field Workers				
All U.S. Wage & Salary Workers	60	63	62	65

Sources:

1 Michigan Department of Agriculture, 2000, Table 2.15 p. 14

2 Michigan Department of Agriculture, 2000, Table 2.15 p. 14

3 Calculations are based on an hourly rate of \$6.25 at 40 hours per week.

(The hourly rate of \$6.25 was arrived at by dividing the annual income of \$7,500 by 150 days and multiplying by 5).

4 Runyan, 2000

5 Runyan, 2000

What limited information there is on the migrant farmworker population shows that the bulk is geographically located in the western part of the state, where labor-intensive agriculture is concentrated. One statewide study shows farmworkers are dispersed across 60 counties, but nearly 80% are concentrated in only 10 (Table 8).

Migrant Farmworker Pressing Issues and Problems

The years between the mid-1960's and the mid 1970's were a golden era for many farmworkers (Martin & Martin, 1994). They marked a turning point in attitudes toward migrants. The 1960's platforms of both political parties included statements about migrants and both houses of Congress created a Subcommittee on Migratory Labor. In 1962, Edward R. Murrow shocked the nation with his famous television documentary on the exploitation of farmworkers in American. His report, "Harvest of Shame," led to the repeal of the bracero program in 1964, under which 4.6 million Mexican workers were brought to this country to harvest U.S. crops under abusive conditions. In the mid 1960's, César Chávez began his campaign to organize California farmworkers into the United Farm Workers union, and the federal government initiated programs to provide educational and health services for migrant farmworkers and their children.

The end of the golden era was hastened by illegal immigration, mostly from Mexico, which rose sharply during the 1970's and 1980's, and which since has contributed to the oversupply of workers and the relatively low return to agricultural labor and poor working and living conditions. Daniel Rothenberg (1998) in his book about the national condition of farmworkers supports this claim of an oversupply of labor when concluding: "The key components of the farm labor system have been a steady oversupply of workers..." The continuing availability of immigrant workers has allowed U.S. farmers to expand their production without improving the wages and working conditions offered their seasonal workers. At the same time, however, the U.S. government and most state governments have failed in their role of protecting domestic

<i>ISSUES</i>	<i>RANKING</i>
Immigration Visa Processing	1
Immigration Raids/Deportation	2
Discrimination/Civil Rights	3
Health and Safety/Pesticides	4
Wage Complaints	5
Employment dispute	6
Housing Conditions	7
Worker's Compensation	8
Public Harassment	9
Bilingual Access Issues	10
Crew leader Problems	11
Domestic Violence	12
Food Stamps	13
Housing/Eviction and Lockouts	14
Social Security/SSI	15
Medical Assistance	16
Day Care Issues	17

Source: Farm Worker Legal Services Priority Survey, 1999.

workers by actually excluding or providing weaker coverage under many laws and regulations that would put farmworkers in par with other workers.

According to farmworker advocates (NCLR, 2000), violations of the few rights that farmworkers do possess are rampant in U.S. agriculture: minimum wage violations; illegal wage deductions; piece-rate wage scams; child labor; lack of field sanitation; dangerous use of pesticides; discrimination against women in hiring; sexual harassment; and failure to report social security.

The types of pressing issues and problems that confront the farmworkers nationally are not unlike the type of issues that farmworkers confront in Michigan. Although limited data makes it difficult to gauge the extent to which farmworkers' legal rights are violated, the legal problems of migrant and seasonal farmworkers in Michigan include the following: "...farmers' failures to pay the minimum wage or promised bonuses, substantial and unexpected changes in the employment contract, deplorable housing, inadequate toilet facilities and running water in the workplace, exposure to toxic agricultural chemicals, confusion about the effect of immigration status, access to public benefits and accommodations, discrimination, inadequate educational opportunities for children, and consumer fraud and misrepresentation (Michigan State Bar Foundation FLS Final Report, 1999). A Farmworker

Legal Services priority survey identified the problem areas of farmworkers in Table 9. These were ranked by the frequency with which the survey respondents identified them.

Two substantive areas of usual concern to farmworkers include housing and health. In housing, troublesome areas include quantity and quality of housing, legal procedures for eviction, federal and state housing standards and sufficient inspectors, and zoning laws to exclude migrant housing and migrant Head Start centers (Gershon, 1992). Health concerns cut across the board, but involve issues of health care access. According to one report (Cote, 2002), there were two known fatalities in the migrant camps in the summer of 2001 in Ottawa County in the western part of the state. A woman giving birth unattended in the field had complications and feared going for medical help and lost her child. In the other incident, a 5-year-old in daycare was returned to his parents with advice to seek medical evaluation. They did so and were sent home with the boy. He died that night. According to the local health professional, "These are horrendous episodes that suggest impaired access to care and a belief that the health care systems in place in Ottawa County are not for them." There is also "a huge need for medical and prescription assistance," (Cote, 2002).

Conclusion

According to students of the farm labor problem, there is an economic-political explanation for the persistence of farm labor problems despite a century of governmental efforts to resolve them. The economic dimension of the explanation suggests farm wages have been lowered both by federal immigration policies, which let additional farmworkers into the United States and by state and federal labor laws that have been slow to extend protections to farmworkers. Thus, from this point of view, the single most effective step would be to reduce the number of workers competing for farm jobs by better enforcing immigration and labor laws (Martin & Martin, 1994).

However, changing governmental policies so that farm wages are raised is difficult because interests likely to incur the costs (farmers and food consumers) will resist such a change. Farmworkers have neither the economic power to persuade farmers to pay higher wages nor the political power to change government policies. For this reason, efforts to reform the migrant labor market and force growers to take responsibility for low wages, and other poor labor market outcomes, will face concerted political resistance.

What happened in the 1960's serves as a case in point about the difficulties in reforming the labor market. Agricultural economists argued then that low farm wages were due to the redundant supply of labor in agriculture. Congressional committees were advised, however, that it would be easier to have the federal government provide services for migrant farmworkers than to regulate the labor market in which they worked. This service-instead-of-regulation strategy succeeded and the federal government launched assistance programs to help migrant farmworkers and their families to escape from agriculture (Martin & Martin, 1994).

The events of Sept. 11, 2001 have made this nation more aware of security concerns and the need to address them. Adopting an approach that stabilizes the agricultural labor market and protects and attracts a domestic workforce is consistent with an increased sense of security that we are now valuing.

If the U.S. is to sustain a stable and legal domestic workforce in the agricultural sector, the option of decreasing the industry's reliance on workers willing to accept near or below poverty-level wages and hazardous working conditions needs to be given serious consideration. The political difficulties associated with proposals that increase labor cost to the employer has given rise to alternative proposals that argue for decoupling the income security of the farmworker from the farm labor market. The end result is to shift the burden of support for the farmworker from the grower to consumers and other beneficiaries of the food

system (Rosenbaum, 2002; Lighthall, 2002; Bissell, 1976). These alternative approaches recognize that the structure of the food system prohibits farmers from passing on the higher labor costs. Moreover, neither consumers, retailers, wholesalers, nor processors are paying the full cost of our food. A scheme that distributes the burden of support for the farmworkers beyond the employers to include all the beneficiaries of the current food system could be more political feasible to the agricultural industry than the approach to simply reduce immigration and reinforce labor laws.

Although labor market reform needs to occur at the national level, there is much that can be done at the state level to address the low wages and earnings of farmworkers and create a more stable workforce. Like with federal laws, in most states state labor laws exclude agricultural labor. Michigan can be a leader in reforming its agricultural labor to make it more stable if it can find ways to accomplish the recommendations below, which are not unlike those offered by the National Council of La Raza (2001) for reform at the national level:

- 1) Extend the same protections afforded all working people under existing state labor laws and regulations;
- 2) Enforce state labor laws more effectively and improve farmworker access to the justice system;
- 3) Promote better wages, benefits, and working and housing conditions to attract and stabilize the agricultural labor force.

The long-term goal of stabilizing the agricultural labor market and protecting and attracting a domestic workforce in agriculture notwithstanding, there is also a need to pursue more immediate goals. There is a lack of consistent and updated information at the state and county level of the supply of and demand for migrant and seasonal farmworkers. The state's employment agencies really do not know how many workers enter Michigan on a seasonal basis (Rochín & Siles, 1994). Moreover, the agricultural sector does not really know how many workers are needed annually for farm employment. Information on the supply of and demand for farmworkers by

county and by crop can be beneficial to policy makers who may want to consider plans to develop a more stable agricultural workforce in Michigan. More research is also needed to better understand the health problems of farmworkers, the nature of labor law enforcement in agriculture, issues of access to health and social services, and abuses from employers and farm labor contractors.

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Endnotes

1. The USDA National Commission on Small Farms, appointed by former Secretary of Agriculture Glickman, produced a report card, *A Time to Act*, in 1999, in which it graded the USDA on 10 areas of concern to small farms. In two of the 10 items, one of which was farmworkers, the report gave USDA its worse mark, a "D."
2. In July 1992, the United States joined 50 other nations in promising to abide by the Helsinki Concluding Document, which contains the most stringent human rights commitments ever agreed to by participating States in the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). The Helsinki Concluding Document pronounces that "human rights and fundamental freedoms are universal, that they are also enjoyed by migrant workers wherever they live..."
3. Ibid., vii.
4. Ibid., vii.
5. Ibid., vii.
6. Ibid., vii.
7. Ibid., vii.
8. Ibid., vii.
9. National Center for Farmworker Health, America's Farmworker Home Page (<http://www.ncfh.org/facts.htm>), July 20, 2001.
10. National Center for Farmworker Health, America's Farmworker Home Page (<http://www.ncfh.org/facts.htm>), July 20, 2001.
11. There has not been an enumeration of migrant and seasonal farmworkers in Michigan since the mid 1980's. Consequently there is not a current estimate on the number of farmworkers and their dependents that come to the state each year. The date from 1985 is believed to reflect the current geographic distribution of the population.