

R I G H T R I S K N E W S

Evolving Role of Foreign Labor in U.S. Agriculture: A Human Capital Risk

President Trump has moved rapidly since his inauguration signing several executive orders as he seeks to implement his agenda within the 1st 100 days. As part of that plan, there have been at least 21 actions focusing on a campaign promise to reduce illegal immigration and overhaul the U.S. immigration system. These actions have focused on increasing deportations (especially violent offenders), fortifying the U.S.-Mexico border, fortifying the U.S.-Canadian border, and halting the processing of migrants and asylum seekers in the U.S., among others.

These actions have generated a renewed focus on foreign labor as part of the larger agricultural labor pool. This includes employing illegal immigrants, hiring individuals legally working in the U.S. with accompanying family members without proper documentation, and legally documented workers.



Agricultural Labor Databases

Several national surveys are used to determine the composition of the U.S. agricultural labor workforce. The Current Population Survey (CPS) from the U.S. Department of Commerce’s Bureau of the Census serves as the foundation for much-published research on the labor market, offering comprehensive demographic information and occupational distinctions (manual laborers, managers/supervisors, etc.) with the ability to examine state-level differences across agricultural operations.

The American Community Survey (ACS) provides monthly data on demographics, labor, and income that, while less detailed than the CPS, surveys over 2 million households annually, making it more reliable for smaller geographic areas with annual national and state-level releases. Finally, the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) from the U.S. Department of Labor conducts face-to-face interviews with randomly sampled U.S. crop workers, collecting valuable demographic, employment, health data, and uniquely estimating legal immigration status, though it excludes livestock workers and H-2A seasonal workers.

Table 1. U.S. Agricultural Farm Labor Workforce and Place of Birth

	Percent born in the U.S. (includes Puerto Rico)	Percent U.S. Citizens
Farm Laborer, graders, sorters	46	56
Farm Managers, inspectors and supervisors	76	83
All other occupations in agriculture	79	87
All occupations in agriculture	61	70
All U.S. Private wage and salary workers	81	91

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service analysis of data from U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, American Community Survey, 2022.

Number of Foreign Workers in the United States

According to the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS 2025), approximately 46

How Much Risk is Right for You?

percent of farm laborers were born in the U.S. and 56 percent are U.S. citizens. These numbers are slightly higher for management and agriculture service jobs, Table 1. They are also significantly lower than the rest of the private industry in the U.S. where approximately 81 percent were born in the U.S. and 91 percent are U.S. citizens. Further, the difference represents the percentage of workers who have gone through the naturalization process by type of work. There are no major differences between the percentage of naturalized citizens working in agriculture compared to the general U.S. population.

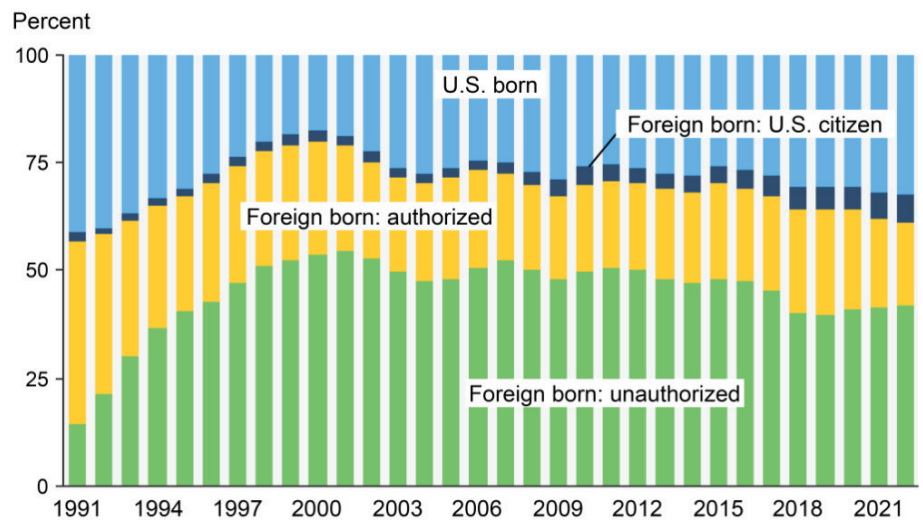
There are also differences between crop and livestock laborers. Crop laborers are approximately 26 percent non-Hispanic White and 41 percent are born in the U.S. compared to livestock laborers who are 49 percent non-Hispanic White and 65 percent were born in the U.S.

Legal Status of Foreign Workers

There is a distinction between foreign-born workers who are US citizens and those who are here either with or without documentation. The NAWS provides data on farmworkers' legal immigration status but, as previously mentioned, it only focuses on crop laborers, ignoring livestock and H-2A workers.

The proportion of crop farmworkers working without legal authorization in the United States significantly increased from approximately 14 percent in the 1989-91 period to roughly 40 percent in recent years, Figure 1. This coincides with the signing of the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that some have suggested spurred the influx of illegal immigration into the U.S. During 2020-22, the workforce comprised 32 percent U.S.-born workers, 7 percent naturalized immigrants, 19 percent legal immigrants (mostly permanent residents with green cards), and 42 percent undocumented workers without work authorization.

Figure 1. Legal Status of Hired Crop Farmworkers, 1991-2022.



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service analysis of data from U.S. Department of Labor, National Agricultural Workers Survey



Work Authorization to Support Agriculture

The U.S. has several work authorization options for agricultural operations looking for foreign-born workers to fill in for a lack of U.S.-born workers. Three of the most popular options for supplementing agricultural labor and management include the H-2A, TN, and O-1A visa programs, Table 2.

The H-2A program is the primary mechanism for legal agricultural labor immigration. The program requires employers to provide housing and transportation and pay mandatory wage rates based on local prevailing wages among others. There are several private agencies that work to recruit

foreign workers, often focusing on a certain geography. Interested operations can find more information about this program at: <https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/temporary-workers/h-2a-temporary-agricultural-workers>.

The TN visa program is another popular that provides opportunities specifically for Canadian and Mexican citizens to work in professional agricultural positions (i.e. agricultural scientists, animal breeders, consultants, and farm managers) in the U.S. It is often preferred as it offers flexibility with indefinite renewability and three-year validity periods. Interested operations can find more information about this program at: <https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/temporary-workers/tn-nafta-professionals>.

The O-1A visa program is aimed at bringing top experts in agricultural sciences to the U.S. These are individuals that have researched, developed, and implemented advanced agricultural technology abroad. It allows individuals to stay for up to three years and the possibility of extensions and for dependents to accompany them. Interested operations can find more information about this program at: <https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/temporary-workers/o-1-visa-individuals-with-extraordinary-ability-or-achievement>.

Table 2. Types of U.S. Visas for Foreign Agricultural Workers

Visa Category	Purpose	Eligibility Criteria	Duration	Annual Cap
H-2A	Temporary or seasonal agricultural work	Job must be temporary or seasonal; Employer must demonstrate a shortage of U.S. workers; Employer must provide free housing and transportation	Up to 1 year, renewable in 1-year increments, max 3 years	No annual cap
TN	Temporary employment for Canadian and Mexican professionals under USMCA	Must be a citizen of Canada or Mexico; Profession must be on the USMCA list; Must have qualifications for the profession	Up to 3 years, renewable indefinitely	No annual cap
O-1	Individuals with extraordinary ability in sciences, arts, education, business, or athletics	Demonstrated extraordinary ability with sustained national or international acclaim; Evidence such as awards, publications, or memberships	Up to 3 years, renewable in 1-year increments	No annual cap

Conclusion

Recent immigration policy changes under President Trump have highlighted foreign workers as part of the labor supply for agriculture. Foreign-born workers in agriculture make up at least half of all farm labor. Among crop production, undocumented workers are nearly 45 percent of the labor supply. Actions by the Trump administration to reduce illegal immigration could impact the labor supply.

The intersection of immigration policy and the availability of labor represents a critical challenge for American agriculture. The H-2A and other visa programs help meet the sector’s labor needs. The path forward likely requires some balance between food security, farm viability, worker protections, and national security concerns, while shifting legal status for both immediate labor needs and long-term structural changes in the agricultural sector.



~ OTHER RIGHTRISK NEWS ~

**NEWS RELEASE - JANUARY 16 | RIGHTRISK
Federal Reserve Beige Book Summary on the Ag Sector**

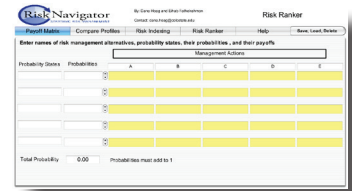
ECONOMIC ACTIVITY increased slightly to moderately across the twelve Federal Reserve Districts in late November and December. Consumer spending moved up moderately, with most Districts reporting strong holiday sales that exceeded expectations. Agricultural conditions remained weak overall, with generally lower farm incomes and weather-related struggles in some areas. The spread of avian flu reduced egg supplies and pushed up prices . . .












For more see: [RightRisk.org\News](https://RightRisk.org/News)

HIGHLIGHTED TOOL: *RISK RANKER*

Risk Ranker helps determine how influential risk is in your decision by computing the Certainty Equivalent (CE) index. Actually 4 tools in one, the *Risk Ranker* tool allows users to enter Payoff Matrix information, Compare Profiles for alternative risk management strategies, Risk Indexer evaluates how much the user would be willing to pay to avoid risk, and Risk Ranker allows you to compare risk profiles side-by-side and ranks management alternatives by 7 different risk ranking techniques. A helpful tool for navigating uncertain times.



For More Information on the Risk Ranker tool, see RightRisk.org > Products > Risk Navigator > Toolbox
For more Risk Analytics, see RightRisk.org/Analytics

	January 2 Social Media Post <i>Evaluating LRP Coverage via RightRisk Analytics</i>		January 21 Social Media Post <i>Job Descriptions Why Waste the Time?</i>
	January 7 Social Media Post <i>Policies and Employee Handbooks</i>		January 23 Social Media Post <i>Estimating Your Cost of Production</i>
	January 9 Social Media Post <i>Harnessing the Power of Partial Budgeting in Agriculture</i>		January 28 Social Media Post <i>Understanding Risk In Agriculture</i>
	January 14 Social Media Post <i>Understanding Financial Performance</i>		January 30 Social Media Post <i>Every Drop Counts: Allocating Scarce Irrigation Water</i>
	January 16 Social Media Post <i>RURAL TAX.org</i>		

Follow us on:



Click here to see current posts:
RightRisk.org/news

Follow us on:



RightRisk helps decision-makers discover innovative and effective risk management solutions

- *Education*
- *Coaching*
- *Research*

RightRisk News is brought to you by the RightRisk Team

Contributing authors:

- Elliott Dennis, Livestock Marketing Specialist - University of Nebraska-Lincoln, elliott.dennis@unl.edu
- John Hewlett, Ranch/Farm Management Specialist - University of Wyoming, hewlett@uwyo.edu
- Jay Parsons, Risk Management Specialist - University of Nebraska-Lincoln, jparsons4@unl.edu
- Jeff Tranel, Ag and Business Management Specialist - Colorado State University, Jeffrey.Tranel@ColoState.edu

Editing and Layout: John Hewlett, hewlett@uwyo.edu

Past issues of *RightRisk News* are available at: RightRisk.org/News

To subscribe/unsubscribe, email information@RightRisk.org

subject line "Subscribe/Unsubscribe RR News"

E-mail: information@RightRisk.org
Web: www.RightRisk.org

How much risk is right for you and your operation?



N EXTENSION
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY
EXTENSION

