



Agriculture and Immigration

By Pawel Styrna | March 2020

The Issue

The U.S. taxpayer spends [almost \\$20 billion](#) on farm subsidies every year. In fact, from 1995 to 2019, agriculture – including qualifying foreigners – received [\\$397 billion](#) in subsidies, with much of it going to large, corporate producers, not family-owned farms. The biggest subsidy recipients within the farming sector include: the growers of corn, wheat, soy beans, rice, and cotton, as well as livestock breeders and dairy producers.

While heavily-subsidized, agriculture and its lobbyists insist they still can't make a [profit without yet another](#) subsidy: cheap foreign labor. Traditionally, that comes in the form of illegal alien workers or temporary foreign workers brought to the U.S. through the [H-2A guest worker program](#).

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, in 2014-2016, about [70 percent](#) of hired crop farmworkers were foreign-born. *And almost half – 48 percent – were in the United States illegally.*

Of course, the “Big Ag” lobby claims there aren't enough [American workers](#) to till their fields and tend to their livestock. But the argument that foreign workers “do the jobs Americans won't do” is a self-serving myth. The fact is, most [farmers](#) don't aggressively recruit American workers, in part, because they don't want to pay fair-market wages. So, to keep costs low, they use foreign labor instead.

Farm Workers and Wages

In 2018, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the [median pay](#) for agricultural workers was \$11.84 per hour, or \$24,620 per year. That was [lower than half](#) the median national income in the U.S. And many [illegal alien](#) workers likely make even less than the median.

With foreign workers willing to accept below market wages, overall rates of pay in the agricultural industry will either fall or stagnate, making it tougher for low-skilled Americans to compete for a limited number of jobs. And those jobs are paying less. According to a recent [study](#) by FAIR, American farm workers, ranch hands, and seasonal pickers have seen their *wages drop by roughly 20 percent over the past three decades.*

Even [Cesar Chavez](#) – the founder of the United Farm Workers and an icon of the Left – opposed the large-scale importation of agricultural guest workers, and refused to turn a blind eye to illegal immigration, due to concerns over wages and jobs. As Chavez's biographer, Miriam Pawel, pointed

out: “a surplus of labor enabled growers to treat workers as little more than interchangeable parts, cheaper and easier to replace than machines.”

If the number of cheap foreign workers declined, employers would be forced to increase wages or invest in technology. But for many large agribusinesses, bringing in workers is the easiest way to cut costs and boost their bottom lines.

Even the Partnership for a New American Economy, which advocates for increased immigration, [concedes](#) in a 2015 report, “as immigration has slowed—wages for seasonal positions have increased.” Conversely, increased mass migration of both illegal aliens and agricultural guest workers would wipe out even the most modest of gains.

What are the chances that more Americans would have filled these positions had they been offered a fair wage? That’s how most employers solve a labor shortage. But corporate agriculture lobbyists claim they should be allowed to favor foreign labor over American workers in order to artificially elevate profits.

The Solution

Since the industry is already heavily-subsidized, it does not make financial sense to ask the American taxpayer to go further into debt to prop up an industry that refuses to adjust and adapt to changing workforce needs. So what are the solutions?

1. Reduce both illegal immigration and the number of foreign agricultural workers
2. Motivate agricultural producers to innovate and modernize
3. Implement mandatory nationwide E-Verify so producers stop hiring illegal aliens
4. Enforce existing workplace law so that repeat violators of labor and immigration laws would be sanctioned or would be ineligible for all agricultural subsidies until they clean up their act
5. Finally, we should consider implementing a federal program encouraging Americans to do seasonal work on farms at fair wages and under decent conditions

Big Agriculture has had long enough to get their act together. It is time to clean up this corrupt and unethical system once and for all.