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Farm Labor: The Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR)

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Summary

American agricultural employers have long utilized foreign workers on a temporary basis, regarding them as an important labor resource. At the same time, the relatively low wages and adverse working conditions of such workers have caused them to be viewed as a threat to domestic American workers.

Some have argued that foreign *guest workers* compete unfairly with U.S. workers in at least two respects. First, they are alleged to compete unfairly in terms of the compensation that they are willing to accept. Second, their presence is alleged to render it more difficult for domestic workers to organize and to bargain collectively with management.

To mitigate any “adverse effect” for the domestic workforce, a system of wage floors was developed that applies, variously, both to alien and citizen workers — i.e., the *adverse effect wage rate* (AEWR).

This report deals with one element of the immigration issue: the question of the use of H-2A workers. It introduces the *adverse effect wage rate*, it examines the concerns out of which it grew, and it explains at least some of the problems that have been encountered in giving it effect.

The report is based, statistically, upon the AEWR issued each spring by the Employment and Training Administration, U.S. Department of Labor. It will be updated periodically as new information becomes available.

The report is written *from the perspective of labor policy, not of immigration policy*. For discussion of immigration policy, see the Current Legislative Issues (CLIs) on the Congressional Research Service webpage.

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Farm Labor: The Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR)

American agricultural employers have long utilized foreign workers on a temporary basis, regarding them as an important labor resource. At the same time, the relatively low wages and adverse working conditions of such workers have caused them to be viewed as a threat to domestic American workers.

To mitigate any “adverse effect” for the domestic workforce, a system of wage floors has been developed that applies, variously, both to alien and to citizen workers — the *adverse effect wage rate*.

The AEWR deals specifically with agricultural workers (i.e., H-2A workers). It involves persons “having a residence in a foreign country which he has no intention of abandoning” and “who is coming temporarily to the United States to perform agricultural labor” of “a temporary or seasonal nature” “...if unemployed persons capable of performing such service or labor cannot be found” in the host country.¹ An AEWR has been developed for each state (see table below) and is announced early each year prior to the growing/production season.

An Introduction to the AEWR

Where countries with widely different economies exist side-by-side, the more prosperous is likely to draw to itself workers from its lower-wage neighbors. Though wages of American agricultural workers are low in comparison with wage rates in the general economy, they are relatively high by the standards of neighboring less developed countries. Thus, a continuing supply of workers has been available for employment in the United States at wage rates and under conditions that American workers, arguably, neither would accept nor, for economic reasons, could accept.

Mexican Guest Worker Utilization: A Brief Historical Overview

Low-wage labor has entered the United States from a variety of countries and under diverse circumstances. Indeed, importation of low-wage labor has been a long-standing tradition.² Here, our concern is with workers from Mexico — a primary

¹ 8 U.S.C. §§ 1101(a)(15)(H)(ii)(a) and (b). See also CRS Report RL32044, *Immigration: Policy Considerations Related to Guest Worker Programs*, by Andorra Bruno.

² There is an extensive literature on the continuing quest of certain American employers for low-wage workers. See, for example, Roger Daniels, *Asian America: Chinese and* (continued...)

focus of U.S. agricultural labor policy. We are dealing with two migratory thrusts. On the one hand, there are workers who, attracted by relatively higher wages in the United States (or by other aspects of American society), have come north as immigrants seeking permanent employment. Conversely, there has been a body of workers who, responding to public policy, have been encouraged to come north — not to seek citizenship but to provide employers with a continuing source of low-wage labor and, at the end of a work period, to return to their country of origin. These latter are the “guest workers” or “braceros.”³

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, movement across the U.S.-Mexican frontier was relatively unrestricted. Mexican nationals joined a resident Mexican-American population in the fields and mines of the Southwest. With World War I, workers from Mexico were recruited to offset the loss of American workers drafted into military service. After the war, a secondary problem arose: how to get the Mexican workers to go back to Mexico — an issue aggravated by the Great Depression. Then, World War II broke out and America turned once more to Mexico for low-skilled/low-wage labor. The result, in various forms, was the *bracero* program.

By war’s end in 1945, agricultural employers had become accustomed to employing Mexican labor that was characterized at the time as docile, non-union, temporary, and payable at low rates while, at the same time, being able and highly motivated. Through the process, a large body of Mexican workers had become acculturated to the American world of work. Having learned at least fragmentary English, they were able to function within the American system without the institutional support of the formal *bracero* program. In short, some might argue, the *bracero* program had been a training school for foreign workers operating outside the normal immigration structure. The *bracero*/guest worker programs, however, were also a source of contention, raising a number of socio-economic questions. Opposition continued to grow until, in 1964, the program was terminated.

Even with termination, however, a body of foreign workers remained in the United States — a force that was augmented by Mexican workers who crossed the border without proper authorization. As American agricultural workers (many of Mexican heritage) sought to improve their economic status through organization, they were confronted by this alien workforce. Several dilemmas were posed. How

² (...continued)

Japanese in the United States Since 1850 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988); Michael L. Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal: Panama, 1904-1981* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984); and Edward D. Beechert, *Working in Hawaii: A Labor History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985). For more recent experience, see Peter Kwong, *Forbidden Workers: Illegal Chinese Immigrants and American Labor*, (New York: The New Press, 1997); and Edna Bonachich, and Richard P. Appelbaum, *Behind the Label: Inequality in the Los Angeles Apparel Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

³ U.S. agricultural workers can be divided into two groups: American workers and foreign workers. Herein, *American* workers are either U.S. citizens or permanent residents, and are distinguishable from foreign (alien, non-immigrant) workers who are in the country on a temporary basis. Further, some *foreign* workers may be here “legally” — others, “illegally.”

might the demand of agribusiness (and of certain other employers) for low-wage workers be satisfied within the context of American labor-management policy and without imperiling the economic livelihood of resident/domestic American labor? And, as the *ex-bracero* community became a political force within the United States, how might these sometimes conflicting objectives be achieved without offending this new body of Americans?⁴

Coping with “Adverse Effect”

By mid-century, these concerns came to be addressed in immigration law. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, as amended, provides for admission to the United States of a person “having a residence in a foreign country which he has no intention of abandoning” and “who is coming temporarily to the United States to perform agricultural labor” of “a temporary or seasonal nature” “... if unemployed persons capable of performing such service or labor cannot be found in this country.”⁵ Later, the act directs that a petition for admission of such persons (H-2A workers) “may not be approved by the Attorney General unless the petitioner [the prospective employer] has applied to the Secretary of Labor” for certification that:

(A) there are not sufficient workers who are able, willing, and qualified, and who will be available at the time and place needed, to perform the labor or services involved in the petition, and

(B) the employment of the alien in such labor or services *will not* adversely affect the wages and working conditions of workers in the United States similarly employed.⁶

If the requirements of paragraphs (A) and (B) are to be effective, they impose a heavy policy burden and responsibility upon the Secretary of Labor.⁷

⁴ Joseph F. Park, in his study, *The History of Mexican Labor in Arizona during the Territorial Period* (M.A. Thesis, University of Arizona, 1961), deals with early cross-frontier labor migration and its impacts. More generally, see Mark Reisler, *By The Sweat of Their Brow: Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States, 1900-1940* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1976); Otey M. Scruggs, *Braceros, “Wetbacks,” and the Farm Labor Problem: Mexican Agricultural Labor in the United States, 1942-1954* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988); Abraham Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression: Repatriation Pressures, 1929-1939* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1974); Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1995); and Richard B. Craig, *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971).

⁵ 8 U.S.C. §§ 1101(a)(15)(H)(ii)(a) and (b).

⁶ 8 U.S.C. §§ 1188(a)(1)(A) and (B). Italics added.

⁷ The conditions under which H-2A workers may be employed are set forth in detail in 20 C.F.R. Part 655. The AEWR is only one small aspect of the H-2A program. For a discussion of the program and of current issues, see CRS Report RL30852, *Immigration of Agricultural Guest Workers: Policy, Trends, and Legislative Issues*, by Ruth Wasem and Geoffrey Collver.

Paragraph (A) focuses upon availability. Are there domestic American workers who are “able” and “qualified” to satisfy the normally low or semi-skilled requirements of temporary agricultural labor? Did Congress mean to have the Secretary assess the skill and ability of each potential domestic agricultural laborer? If not, then these qualifications are reduced largely to a single standard: willingness to be employed. Even that measure can be complex. Must the potential worker be “willing” to work at whatever wage an employer may be willing to offer and under whatever conditions may exist — even if adverse?

Almost by definition, the H-2A worker is willing to accept a lower wage and conditions more adverse than would be acceptable to most American workers. Thus (following documentable recruitment efforts), a prospective employer can affirm that American workers are unavailable and that he is only offering the H-2A worker employment that American workers “don’t want and won’t accept.” In other labor markets, however, some may argue, movement toward higher wages and improved conditions could be expected to attract American workers.⁸

As part of his responsibility under paragraph (A), the Secretary of Labor has developed a three-tiered wage rate requirement. The regulations state:

If the worker will be paid by the hour, the employer shall pay the worker at least the adverse effect wage rate in effect at the time the work is performed, the prevailing hourly wage rate, or the legal federal or State minimum wage rate, whichever is highest...⁹

The AEW is set forth by the Department of Labor (DOL), based upon data gathered by the Department of Agriculture (DOA). DOA conducts a quarterly survey of the wages of field and livestock workers throughout the United States. The AEW, then, is a weighted average of the DOA findings, calculated on a regional basis. It is adjusted, each year, taking into account prior experience with the change of the “average hourly wage rates for field and livestock workers (combined) based on the USDA Quarterly Wage Survey.”¹⁰ The rate (see **Table 1**) is set for each state (except Alaska for which no rate has been fixed). The AEW has no *direct* effect where an employer does not seek to engage H-2A workers. However, if he does engage H-2A workers and subsequently locates and hires American workers, then he is required to pay each group not less than the AEW.

Paragraph (B) presents a more complex issue: i.e., demonstrating that employment of H-2A workers “will not adversely affect the wages and working conditions of workers in the United States similarly employed.” Many view the

⁸ Questions persist about possible farm labor shortages and the impact of foreign workers. See CRS Report RL30395, *Farm Labor Shortages and Immigration Policy*, by Linda Levine.

⁹ 20 C.F.R. § 655.102(b)(9)(i). The regulations set out separate requirements if the worker is paid on a piece rate basis. See 20 C.F.R. § 655.102(b)(9)(ii).

¹⁰ 20 C.F.R. § 655.207(a), (b) and (c). Concerning the methodology for calculation of the AEW, see *Federal Register*, June 1, 1987, pp. 20496-20533, and *Federal Register*, July 5, 1989, pp. 28037-28051.

AEWR structure as effectively setting *a cap* on the earnings of certain agricultural workers. If domestic workers are not available at the specified rate, the employer is allowed to employ foreign workers who, given the disparity in wage rates between Mexico and the United States, will almost always be available at the AEWR.

The H-2A option provides agricultural employers with an alternative source of labor and, in effect, expands the pool of available workers — enhancing competition for available jobs. With that option open to them, agribusiness employers may have no need to revise their recruitment and employment policies to make such employment more attractive to American workers. Further, some may view the availability of foreign agricultural workers as a device through which to deter trade unionization of domestic agricultural workers and to preclude the necessity of bargaining with domestic U.S. workers with respect to wages and conditions of employment.

Table 1. Adverse Effect Wage Rate by State, 1990-2005
(in current dollars and cents)

State ^a	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Alabama	4.29	4.46	4.91	5.04	5.43	5.66	5.40	5.92	6.30	6.30	6.72	6.83	7.28	7.49	7.88	8.07	8.37
Arizona	4.61	4.87	5.17	5.37	5.52	5.80	5.87	5.82	6.08	6.42	6.74	6.71	7.12	7.61	7.54	7.63	8.00
Arkansas	4.04	4.40	4.73	4.87	5.26	5.19	5.27	5.70	5.98	6.21	6.50	6.69	6.77	7.13	7.38	7.80	7.58
California	5.90	5.81	5.90	6.11	6.03	6.24	6.26	6.53	6.87	7.23	7.27	7.56	8.02	8.44	8.50	8.56	9.00
Colorado	4.51	5.00	5.29	5.44	5.57	5.62	5.64	6.09	6.39	6.73	7.04	7.43	7.62	8.07	8.36	8.93	8.37
Connecticut	4.98	5.21	5.61	5.82	5.97	6.21	6.36	6.71	6.84	7.18	7.68	8.17	7.94	8.53	9.01	9.05	9.16
Delaware	4.89	4.93	5.39	5.81	5.92	5.81	5.97	6.26	6.33	6.84	7.04	7.37	7.46	7.97	8.52	8.48	8.95
Florida	5.16	5.38	5.68	5.91	6.02	6.33	6.54	6.36	6.77	7.13	7.25	7.66	7.69	7.78	8.18	8.07	8.56
Georgia	4.29	4.46	4.91	5.04	5.43	5.66	5.40	5.92	6.30	6.30	6.72	6.83	7.28	7.49	7.88	8.07	8.37
Hawaii	7.70	7.85	7.95	8.11	8.36	8.73	8.60	8.62	8.83	8.97	9.38	9.05	9.25	9.42	9.60	9.75	9.99
Idaho	4.49	4.79	4.94	5.25	5.59	5.57	5.76	6.01	6.54	6.48	6.79	7.26	7.43	7.70	7.69	8.20	8.47
Illinois	4.88	5.05	5.59	5.85	6.02	6.18	6.23	6.66	7.18	7.53	7.62	8.09	8.38	8.65	9.00	9.20	9.21
Indiana	4.88	5.05	5.59	5.85	6.02	6.18	6.23	6.66	7.18	7.53	7.62	8.09	8.38	8.65	9.00	9.20	9.21
Iowa	5.03	4.85	5.15	5.65	5.76	5.72	5.90	6.22	6.86	7.17	7.76	7.84	8.33	8.91	9.28	8.95	9.49
Kansas	5.17	5.20	5.36	5.78	6.03	5.99	6.29	6.55	7.01	7.12	7.49	7.81	8.24	8.53	8.83	9.00	9.23
Kentucky	4.45	4.56	5.04	5.09	5.29	5.47	5.54	5.68	5.92	6.28	6.39	6.60	7.07	7.20	7.63	8.17	8.24
Louisiana	4.04	4.40	4.73	4.87	5.26	5.19	5.27	5.70	5.98	6.21	6.50	6.69	6.77	7.13	7.38	7.80	7.58
Maine	4.98	5.21	5.61	5.82	5.97	6.21	6.36	6.71	6.84	7.18	7.68	8.17	7.94	8.53	9.01	9.05	9.16
Maryland	4.89	4.93	5.39	5.81	5.92	5.81	5.97	6.26	6.33	6.84	7.04	7.37	7.46	7.97	8.52	8.48	8.95
Massachusetts	4.98	5.21	5.61	5.82	5.97	6.21	6.36	6.71	6.84	7.18	7.68	8.17	7.94	8.53	9.01	9.05	9.16
Michigan	4.45	4.90	5.16	5.38	5.64	5.65	6.19	6.56	6.85	7.34	7.65	8.07	8.57	8.70	9.11	9.18	9.43
Minnesota	4.45	4.90	5.16	5.38	5.64	5.65	6.19	6.56	6.85	7.34	7.65	8.07	8.57	8.70	9.11	9.18	9.43
Mississippi	4.04	4.40	4.73	4.87	5.26	5.19	5.27	5.70	5.98	6.21	6.50	6.69	6.77	7.13	7.38	7.80	7.58
Missouri	5.03	4.85	5.15	5.85	5.76	5.72	5.90	6.22	6.86	7.17	7.76	7.84	8.33	8.91	9.28	8.95	9.49
Montana	4.49	4.79	4.94	5.25	5.59	5.57	5.76	6.01	6.54	6.48	6.79	7.26	7.43	7.70	7.69	8.20	8.47

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State ^a	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Nebraska	5.17	5.20	5.36	5.78	6.03	5.99	6.29	6.55	7.01	7.12	7.49	7.81	8.24	8.53	8.83	9.00	9.23
Nevada	4.51	5.00	5.29	5.44	5.57	5.62	5.64	6.09	6.39	6.73	7.04	7.43	7.62	8.07	8.36	8.93	8.37
New Hampshire	4.98	5.21	5.61	5.82	5.97	6.21	6.36	6.71	6.84	7.18	7.68	8.17	7.94	8.53	9.01	9.05	9.16
New Jersey	4.89	4.93	5.39	5.81	5.92	5.81	5.97	6.26	6.33	6.84	7.04	7.37	7.46	7.97	8.52	8.48	8.95
New Mexico	4.61	4.87	5.17	5.37	5.52	5.80	5.87	5.82	6.08	6.42	6.74	6.71	7.12	7.61	7.54	7.63	8.00
New York	4.98	5.21	5.61	5.82	5.97	6.21	6.36	6.71	6.84	7.18	7.68	8.17	7.94	8.53	9.01	9.05	9.16
North Carolina	4.33	4.50	4.97	5.07	5.38	5.50	5.80	5.79	6.16	6.54	6.98	7.06	7.53	7.75	8.06	8.24	8.51
North Dakota	5.17	5.20	5.36	5.78	6.03	5.99	6.29	6.55	7.01	7.12	7.49	7.81	8.24	8.53	8.83	9.00	9.23
Ohio	4.88	5.05	5.59	5.85	6.02	6.18	6.23	6.66	7.18	7.53	7.62	8.09	8.38	8.65	9.00	9.20	9.21
Oklahoma	4.65	4.61	4.87	5.01	4.98	5.32	5.50	5.48	5.92	6.25	6.49	6.98	7.28	7.29	7.73	7.89	8.32
Oregon	5.42	5.69	5.94	6.31	6.51	6.41	6.82	6.87	7.08	7.34	7.64	8.14	8.60	8.71	8.73	9.03	9.01
Pennsylvania	4.89	4.93	5.39	5.81	5.92	5.81	5.97	6.26	6.33	6.84	7.04	7.37	7.46	7.97	8.52	8.48	8.95
Rhode Island	4.98	5.21	5.61	5.82	5.97	6.21	6.36	6.71	6.84	7.18	7.68	8.17	7.94	8.53	9.01	9.05	9.16
South Carolina	4.29	4.46	4.91	5.04	5.43	5.66	5.40	5.92	6.30	6.30	6.72	6.83	7.28	7.49	7.88	8.07	8.37
South Dakota	5.17	5.20	5.36	5.78	6.03	5.99	6.29	6.55	7.01	7.12	7.49	7.81	8.24	8.53	8.83	9.00	9.23
Tennessee	4.45	4.56	5.04	5.09	5.29	5.47	5.54	5.68	5.92	6.28	6.39	6.60	7.07	7.20	7.63	8.17	8.24
Texas	4.65	4.61	4.87	5.01	4.98	5.32	5.50	5.48	5.92	6.25	6.49	6.98	7.28	7.29	7.73	7.89	8.32
Utah	4.51	5.00	5.29	5.44	5.57	5.62	5.64	6.09	6.39	6.73	7.04	7.43	7.62	8.07	8.36	8.93	8.37
Vermont	4.98	5.21	5.61	5.82	5.97	6.21	6.36	6.71	6.84	7.18	7.68	8.17	7.94	8.53	9.01	9.05	9.16
Virginia	4.33	4.50	4.97	5.07	5.38	5.50	5.80	5.79	6.16	6.54	6.98	7.06	7.53	7.75	8.06	8.24	8.51
Washington	5.42	5.69	5.94	6.31	6.51	6.41	6.82	6.87	7.08	7.34	7.64	8.14	8.60	8.71	8.73	9.03	9.01
West Virginia	4.45	4.56	5.04	5.09	5.29	5.47	5.54	5.68	5.92	6.28	6.39	6.60	7.07	7.20	7.63	8.17	8.24
Wisconsin	4.45	4.90	5.16	5.38	5.64	5.65	6.19	6.56	6.85	7.34	7.65	8.07	8.57	8.70	9.11	9.18	9.43
Wyoming	4.49	4.79	4.94	5.25	5.59	5.57	5.76	6.01	6.54	6.48	6.79	7.26	7.43	7.70	7.69	8.20	8.47

Source: Compiled from data provided by the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration. See *Federal Register*, Feb. 26, 2003, pp. 8929-8930; Mar. 19, 2003, p. 13331; Mar. 3, 2004, pp. 10063-10065; Mar. 2, 2005, pp. 10152-10153; and Mar 16, 2006, pp. 13633-13635.

a. The U.S. Department of Agriculture does not calculate an AEWR for Alaska.