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Measuring Employment in the Agricultural Sector in the Context of the H-2A Visa Program

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The U.S. agricultural labor force is comprised of U.S. citizens and foreign nationals, including foreign nationals participating in the H-2A agricultural worker visa program. The reliance on foreign workers is not simple to measure. In the 118th Congress, the House Committee on Agriculture formed a bipartisan Agricultural Labor Working Group “to focus on the workforce issues faced by the nation’s agricultural producers.” Much of this committee’s work focused on the growing role of the H-2A agricultural worker visa program, amidst uncertainty over the share of agricultural employment now provided by H-2A workers. As an example of this uncertainty, the Secure the Border Act of 2023 (H.R. 2), which passed the House in the 118th Congress, would have required the Secretary of Homeland Security, in consultation with the Secretary of Agriculture, to submit a report on agricultural labor, including the number of people in the agricultural workforce and the number of foreign nationals in the agricultural workforce who are authorized for this work.

This report describes how agricultural employment is measured in the United States through official government data sources. Agricultural employment is measured in different ways in different sources, which provide information about different portions of the agricultural workforce. Some federal data sources generally used to measure employment in the United States include agricultural workers, some do not include them at all, and others include only a subset of agricultural workers. Some data sources that focus on agricultural employment include workers on H-2A visas and others do not. This report describes the agricultural and H-2A coverage of federal employment data sources.

Most agricultural workers are hired for a wage or salary. Data on employment of hired workers in agricultural industries are available from several sources. Notably, the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) measures employment of workers covered by Unemployment Insurance (UI). Coverage requirements of UI vary somewhat from state to state, but agricultural employment on all but the farms with the fewest employees is generally included, while workers on H-2A visas in many states are excluded. QCEW data show employment in crop production and in support activities for agriculture are highly seasonal. They also show an overall shift in employment from crop producers to farm labor contractors between 2004 and 2019, driven by employment shifts within California. A separate source of employment data for hired workers is the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Farm Labor Survey (FLS), which measures employment of workers on farms and ranches. Unlike the QCEW, the FLS includes workers on H-2A visas, but it does not cover employment by farm labor contractors.

Data on the number of farmers and ranchers are also available from several sources, which measure this group in different ways. As examples, the Current Population Survey (CPS) measures the number of people for whom agricultural work is their main job, while the Census of Agriculture (COA) asks the number of producers (i.e., decisionmakers) on each farm or ranch.

Foreign born agricultural workers include people with and without legal authorization to work in the United States. The only federal data source that collects information on whether farmworkers have legal authorization to work in the United States is the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS), a survey of one or two thousand crop workers per year. These data show a sharp increase in the percentage of crop workers without legal authorization to work in the United States between 1990 and 2000, and a decline in the percentage of crop workers without legal authorization in more recent years.

Data on the number of agricultural workers in the United States on H-2A visas, where they work, and where they come from are collected by several federal agencies, none of which collect all of these data. The Department of Labor collects and publishes detailed agricultural industry information from employers seeking labor certification to hire workers on these visas, but not all labor certifications result in hires. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services collects and publishes information on the geography of employers petitioning for visas to hire these workers, but not all approved visa petitions result in hiring the full number of approved workers. The Department of State collects information on the number of workers who actually obtain these visas and their countries of origin. However, it is not possible to estimate the number of H-2A workers working in a specific industry and/or geographic area without making various assumptions.

Two summary tables (**Table 3** and **Table 4**) comparing the coverage of agricultural employment in these data sources are provided at the end of this report.

Contents

Introduction	1
Coverage of the Agricultural Sector in Standard Employment Data.....	3
The Current Employment Statistics (CES)	3
The Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW)	3
The Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS).....	6
Recent and Proposed Expansions and Contractions of the OEWS.....	7
The Current Population Survey (CPS).....	7
The American Community Survey (ACS)	8
Coverage of Employment in Agricultural Statistics	10
Census of Agriculture (COA).....	10
The Farm Labor Survey (FLS).....	12
Recent Expansions and Suspensions of the FLS	13
The National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS).....	14
H-2A Visa Program Data.....	15
Data from the Office of Foreign Labor Certification (OFLC)	16
Data from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services	17
Data from the Department of State	18
Summary Tables	19

Figures

Figure 1. National Employment in the Agriculture Sector in QCEW Data.....	5
Figure 2. National Employment in the Agricultural Sector in CPS Data	8
Figure 3. National Employment in the Agricultural Sector in ACS Data.....	10
Figure 4. National Employment of Hired Farm and Ranch Workers in COA Data	12
Figure 5. National Employment of Hired Farm and Ranch Workers in FLS Data.....	13
Figure 6. Distribution of Crop Workers by Legal Status in NAWS Data, 1989-2022.....	15
Figure 7. Steps Involved in Bringing H-2A Workers to the United States.....	16
Figure 8. H-2A Certified Workers by Crop Type in OFLC Data, 2010-2023	17
Figure 9. Number of H-2A Visas Approved by USCIS in FY2023.....	18
Figure 10. Number of H-2A Visas Issued.....	19

Tables

Table 1. Estimates of Agricultural Employment from Selected Sources.....	2
Table 2. Employment in NAICS 115, Support Activities for Agriculture and Forestry, May 2023.....	6
Table 3. Comparison of Selected Sources of Agricultural Employment Data.....	20
Table 4. Sources of Agricultural Employment Data by Worker and Employer Group	22

Contacts

Author Information..... 23

Introduction

The H-2A visa program allows for the temporary admission into the United States of nonimmigrant¹ foreign workers for the purpose of performing agricultural labor or services of a seasonal or temporary nature.² In recent years, the number of H-2A visas issued has increased sharply, drawing interest from Congress. For example, in the 118th Congress, the House Committee on Agriculture formed a bipartisan Agricultural Labor Working Group “to focus on the workforce issues faced by the nation’s agricultural producers,” and all 15 of the policy changes unanimously supported by this Working Group involve the H-2A program. Similarly, the Secure the Border Act of 2023 (H.R. 2), which passed the House in 2023, would have required the Secretaries of Homeland Security and Agriculture to submit a report on the number of people in the agricultural workforce and the number of foreign nationals in the agricultural workforce who are authorized for this work (H-2A workers).

The farm workforce is important because agriculture is essential to the health and wellbeing of Americans. It is a particular concern for Congress because farmers and farm advocates have longstanding concerns about a shortage of farm workers, and federal policy—via the H-2A program—has a large and direct influence on the size and composition of the farm workforce.³

Estimating the size of the agricultural labor force has technical challenges. The number of farm workers varies seasonally with crop production and farm workers may work on multiple farms during a year. Workers without legal authorization to work in the United States may be less willing to respond to federal data collections than workers with legal authorization, and their employers may underreport the employment of workers without legal authorization. There are persistent concerns that some small farms and some farm labor contractors are frequent violators of labor laws, including labor laws that involve employment reports to government agencies.⁴

This report describes how agricultural employment is measured in federal government data sources in the United States. These data sources vary in the extent of the farm labor force they measure. Some data sources generally used to measure employment in the United States include agriculture, some do not include it at all, and others cover it only in part.

The U.S. agricultural labor force can be divided in several ways, and different data sources, designed for different purposes, often measure only some of its divisions. For example, the agricultural labor force can be divided among self-employed farmers and ranchers, hired wage and salary workers, and unpaid family members, and some data sources measure only the employment of hired wage and salary workers. Hired agricultural workers can be further divided between those who work directly for farms and ranches and those who work in agricultural support businesses such as farm labor contractors (i.e., business that supply labor for agricultural production or harvesting work). Some data sources cover only the employment of hired agricultural workers employed directly by farmers and ranchers, while others cover only the

¹ A *nonimmigrant* is a foreign national who is admitted for a designated period of time and specific purpose. There are 24 major nonimmigrant visa categories, which are commonly referred to by the letter and numeral that denote their subsection in the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA; Title 8 of the *U.S. Code*).

² This program is described in more detail in CRS Report R44849, *H-2A and H-2B Temporary Worker Visas: Policy and Related Issues*.

³ Previous CRS reports on this topic include CRS Report RL30395, *Farm Labor Shortages and Immigration Policy* (2009); and CRS Report DL84972, *The interrelationship of immigration, mechanization, trade unionization, and manpower utilization in agriculture* (1984). (Both reports are available to congressional clients on request.)

⁴ Philip L. Martin, *Bracero 2.0: Mexican workers in North American agriculture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2024), p. 57.

employment of hired workers in agricultural support industries. Some data sources cover workers who are temporarily in the United States on H-2A visas and some do not. **Table 1** lists the main sources of agricultural employment data, the portions of agricultural employment covered by each source, and the overall magnitudes of their employment estimates.

Table 1. Estimates of Agricultural Employment from Selected Sources

Source	Estimate	Reference Date	Employment Measured	Includes employees of farm labor contractors?	Includes H-2A workers?
The Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW)	1,251,522	2023 average	Number of people on payroll covered by Unemployment Insurance (UI)	Yes	Only in states where H-2A workers are covered by UI
The Current Population Survey (CPS)	2,264,000	2023 average	Number of usual residents employed (in their main job)	Yes	No
The American Community Survey (ACS)	2,340,773	2023	Number of current residents employed (in their main job)	Yes	Some
The Census of Agriculture (COA)	3,374,044 farm and ranch operators 2,184,493 hired farm workers 1,508,898 unpaid workers	2022	Number of people in each category on farms and ranches. (People may be double counted if they work on more than one farm or ranch.)	No	Yes
The Farm Labor Survey (FLS)	679,800	2023 average	Number of directly hired farm and ranch workers	No	Yes
H-2A visa issuance data	310,676	2023	H-2A visas issued to foreign workers	Yes	Yes

Source: CRS compilation and tabulation based on the sources cited in **Table 3**.

Notes: This table includes sources of employment estimates for farms and ranches. Farm and ranch operators (“Producers”) in the Census of Agriculture include 174,308 Hired Managers. The ACS coverage rules include H-2A workers staying at a surveyed address for two months or more.

The report begins by describing the sources of federal data generally used to measure employment in the United States, with a focus on the coverage of each source for measuring agricultural employment. These sources include three surveys conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), one survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, and one survey jointly sponsored by these agencies. The report then describes federal data specific to the agricultural sector, with a focus on employment measures collected in these data. These sources include a census and a survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and a survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). Next, the report describes the available data

on the H-2A program and the number of agricultural workers involved in the program. Varying data on this topic are available from DOL, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and the Department of State (DOS). For each data source in each of these sections, the report discusses key features (e.g., agricultural employment information collected, coverage, level of industry, occupation, geographic detail available, the extent of coverage for workers on H-2A visas). It also presents a national-level example of the kinds of agricultural employment information available from each source. The report concludes with two summary tables (**Table 3** and **Table 4**) comparing the coverage of agricultural employment in these data sources.

Coverage of the Agricultural Sector in Standard Employment Data

This section describes the coverage of agricultural employment within federal statistical programs generally used for measuring overall employment in the United States.

The Current Employment Statistics (CES)

The CES program produces detailed estimates of employment on payrolls by industry each month. These estimates are released monthly as part of the Employment Situation report from BLS. The CES data provide key measures of the overall health of the U.S. economy (e.g., changes in payroll employment, industry employment).⁵ Since its start in 1915 as a survey of manufacturing industries only, the CES program expanded to cover all of manufacturing by 1935, and all government and private sector private-sector non-farm industries in 1964.⁶ *CES data do not provide estimates of employment in agricultural industries.*⁷ This data source is briefly mentioned here only because it is such a prominent source of employment data for the rest of the economy.

The Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW)

The QCEW is produced by BLS from the administrative data of state unemployment insurance (UI) programs, supplemented with employer surveys and reviewed by BLS in collaboration with State Workforce Agencies (SWAs). Each quarter, private-sector employers and governments send their state UI system a report listing the total number of employees covered by UI each month and the total compensation paid to all covered employees that quarter. About 95% of all wage and salary employment in the United States is covered by the QCEW.⁸ BLS regularly surveys

⁵ DOL, BLS, *Current Employment Statistics - CES Overview*, <https://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cesprog.htm>.

⁶ John P. Mullins, “One hundred years of Current Employment Statistics—an overview of survey advancements,” *Monthly Labor Review*, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, August 2016, <https://doi.org/10.21916/mlr.2016.39>.

⁷ DOL, BLS, *Current Employment Statistics - CES Overview*, <https://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cesprog.htm>. The last major expansion of CES coverage happened in 1964, which was before agricultural industries were required to participate in UI (as described in the next section). The CES program relies on data from the UI program in several ways that are detailed in DOL, BLS, *Technical Notes for the CES National Benchmark*, <https://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cestn.htm>.

⁸ This estimate comes from Table 3 of Ryan A. Decker, Robert J. Kurtzman, Byron F. Lutz, and Christopher J. Nekarda, “Across the Universe: Policy Support for Employment and Revenue in the Pandemic Recession,” *Finance and Economics Discussion Series 2020-099r1*, Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.17016/FEDS.2020.099r1>. This table shows QCEW coverage of 100% of government employment and 94% of private-sector wage and salary employment, including 33% of wage and salary employment on farms and 95% of private-sector non-farm wage and salary employment.

employers to properly classify their location and economic activity. BLS uses these data to publish tabulations of employment and wages at the county level by detailed industry, where there are a sufficient number of employers that publication would not reveal information provided by any individual employer. These data are published about five months after the end of each quarter.⁹

A small share of farms and some farmworkers are not included in these data because they are not covered by the UI system. In addition, workers temporarily in the United States on H-2A visas are not covered by UI in several states, including southeastern states (such as Florida) with large employment of H-2A workers.¹⁰ The UI program has historically provided less coverage to the employees of agricultural employers than to employees of nonagricultural employers. Since amendments made to the Federal Unemployment Tax Act in 1976, agricultural employers are required to participate in the UI program if they pay total wages to all employees of \$20,000 or more in any quarter of the current or preceding year or if they employ 10 or more workers on at least one day in each of 20 different weeks in the current or preceding year. These size requirements for UI coverage apply to farms and ranches as well as agricultural support businesses such as farm labor contractors. The requirement that agricultural employers must participate in the UI program if they have a wage bill of \$20,000 or more in any quarter means that a large and growing share of farm employment is covered by UI. In addition, some states extend UI coverage to agricultural employers with even lower employment levels. Seven states (California, Florida, Minnesota, New York, Rhode Island, Texas, and Washington), Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the District of Columbia require agricultural employers to provide UI coverage at lower thresholds than required by federal law.¹¹ California and Washington are also among the states that require UI coverage for H-2A workers.¹²

The QCEW classifies industries using the North American Industrial Classification System (NAICS). Agriculture is part of NAICS sector 11: “Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, and Hunting.” This sector is divided into the three-digit subsectors 111: “Crop Production,” 112: “Animal Production and Aquaculture,” 113: “Forestry and Logging,” 114: “Fishing, Hunting, and Trapping,” and 115: “Support Activities for Agriculture and Forestry.” This last subsector contains the detailed six-digit industry 115115: “Farm Labor Contractors and Crew Leaders.”

QCEW data are available for many combinations of detailed industries and detailed geographies. For example, there are many counties in which monthly employment data are available for the detailed industry 11114: “Wheat farming.” QCEW data are not estimated separately by occupation. They double-count people who have more than one agricultural employer within the same quarter of the year.

Figure 1 shows national-level monthly employment within NAICS sector 11 at the three-digit industry level from 2018 through 2023, as measured by the QCEW. In 2023, the QCEW measured average annual employment as 1,250,000 in the Agricultural Sector.

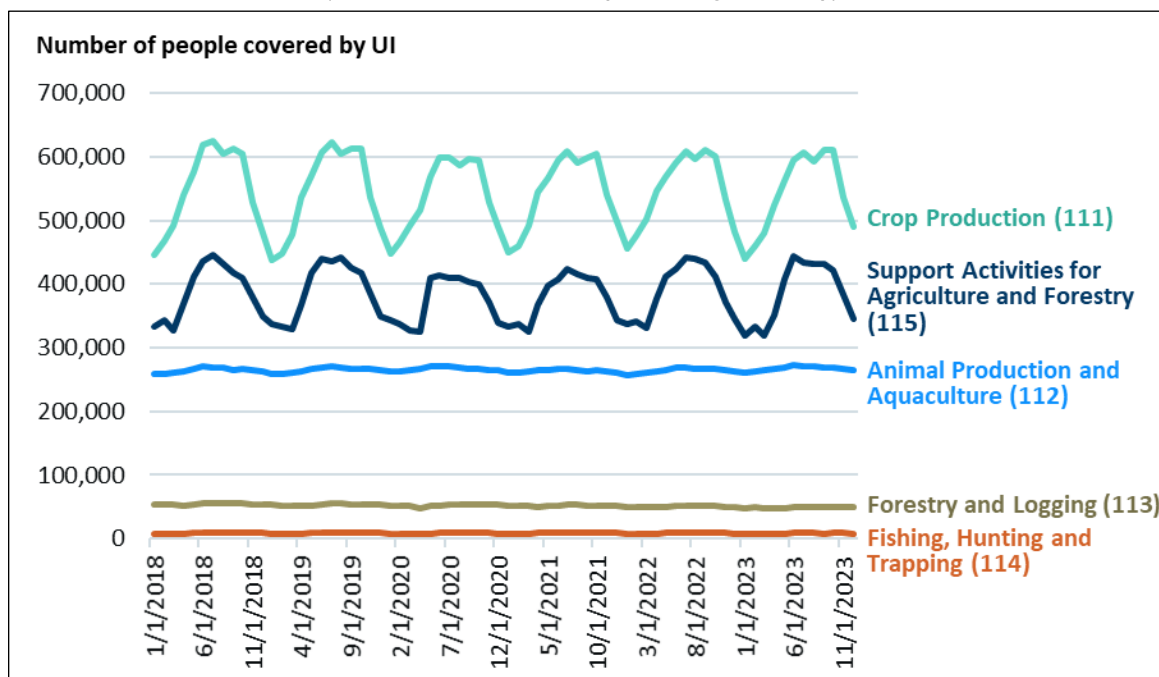
⁹ DOL, BLS, *Handbook of Methods: Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages*, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/hom/cew/home.htm>.

¹⁰ Philip L. Martin, *Bracero 2.0: Mexican workers in North American agriculture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), p. 57.

¹¹ DOL, Employment and Training Administration (ETA), Office of Unemployment Insurance, *Comparison of State Unemployment Insurance Laws, 2023*, p. 2, <https://oui.doleta.gov/unemploy/pdf/uilawcompar/2023/coverage.pdf>.

¹² Philip L. Martin, *Bracero 2.0: Mexican workers in North American agriculture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), p. 57.

Figure 1. National Employment in the Agriculture Sector in QCEW Data
(all of NAICS Sector 11, by three-digit industry)



Source: BLS, QCEW.

Notes: QCEW employment data include wage and salary workers covered by state UI programs.

The figure shows that employment in this sector is highly seasonal in the Crop Production and Support Activities for Agriculture and Forestry industries (with substantially greater employment in summer than winter). The lack of seasonality in employment for Animal Production industries prevents their agricultural employers from using the H-2A visa program.¹³

From 2004 through 2019 (before the more recent years depicted in **Figure 1**), the QCEW showed changes in the distribution of employment between agricultural industries. Employment in Crop Production and in Forestry and Logging fell by 28,000, while employment in Support Activities for Agriculture and Forestry rose by 81,000, including growth in employment of 41,000 by farm labor contractors. These national-level changes in the composition of employment between agricultural industries were driven by changes within California, where employment in Crop Production fell by 16,000 and employment by farm labor contractors grew by 49,000.¹⁴ Since 2019, employment patterns by agricultural industry in the QCEW have been more stable.

¹³ 20 C.F.R. §655.103(d). This is discussed in U.S. Congress, House Agriculture Committee, *Final Report with Policy Recommendations*, committee print, prepared by the Agricultural Labor Working Group, 118th Cong., 2nd Sess., March 7, 2024, p. 13, https://agriculture.house.gov/uploadedfiles/alwg_final_report_-_3.7.23.pdf. One recent proposal, Section 202 (i)(2) and (i)(3)(B) in the Farm Workforce Modernization Act of 2023 (H.R. 4319) would address this issue by adding 20,000 nonseasonal H-2A worker visas, with half reserved for employers in the dairy industry.

¹⁴ There is an extensive discussion of the expanding role of farm labor contractor employment in California, particularly farm labor contractor employment of H-2A workers, in Marcelo Castillo, Skyler Simmitt, Gregory Astill, and Travis Minor, *Examining the Growth in Seasonal Agricultural H-2A Labor*, ERS, Economic Information Bulletin No. (EIB-226), August 2021, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=102014>.

The Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS)

The OEWS program is also produced by BLS. These estimates are based on surveys conducted in cooperation with SWAs. The OEWS surveys nonfarm employers covered by state UI programs as well as rail transportation employers. Survey data are collected in May and November each year and estimates are published each spring based on data collected during the previous three years. Surveyed employers are asked about the number of people they employ in each occupation and either the hourly or annual wages they pay each of these workers; many respondents give BLS a copy of their payroll data for the survey month. The most recent estimates (providing estimates for May 2023) were based on a sample size of 1.1 million establishments surveyed from November 2020 through May 2023, with an overall response rate of 64.3%.¹⁵ Where workers on H-2A visas are not covered by UI, they are not included in OEWS employment estimates.¹⁶

The OEWS program publishes wage estimates by occupation and by industry or geography for all nonfarm industries. It does not currently collect data or publish any estimates for NAICS industry 111, Crop Production, or NAICS industry 112, Animal Production and Aquaculture. However, the OEWS program publishes data on national-level employment by occupation within NAICS industry 115, Support Activities for Agriculture and Forestry.¹⁷ Research data are available on employment by occupation for these industries at the state level.¹⁸ An example of the agricultural employment data available from this program is shown in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Employment in NAICS 115, Support Activities for Agriculture and Forestry, May 2023

Overall and for the largest five detailed occupations

Occupation Title	Employment	Percentage of Total Employment
All Occupations	369,190	100.00%
Farmworkers and Laborers, Crop, Nursery, and Greenhouse	189,670	51.38%
Hand Packers and Packagers	17,120	4.64%
Agricultural Equipment Operators	14,490	3.92%
Farmworkers, Farm, Ranch, and Agricultural Animals	12,140	3.29%
First-Line Supervisors of Farming, Fishing, and Forestry Workers	11,600	3.14%

Source: BLS, OEWS.

¹⁵ DOL, BLS, *Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics: Technical Notes for May 2023 OEWS Estimates*, April 4, 2024, https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_tec.htm.

¹⁶ Email to CRS from OEWS program staff, August 9, 2024.

¹⁷ DOL, BLS, *Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics: May 2023 National Industry-Specific Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates*, <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oesrci.htm#11>. OEWS estimates are also available separately for 1151, Support Activities for Crop Production (which includes 115115, Farm Labor Contractors and Crew Leaders) and 1152, Support Activities for Animal Production.

¹⁸ DOL, BLS, *Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics: May 2023 State Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates*, April 3, 2024, <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oesrcst.htm>. The OEWS program publishes employment estimates by occupation across all industries for all states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. However, research estimates for employment by occupation specific to agricultural industries at the state level are only available for U.S. states with greater numbers of employers in these industries.

Notes: OEWS employment data include wage and salary workers covered by state UI programs. This is a table of employment by occupation within NAICS 115, Support Activities for Agriculture and Forestry only. Occupations with employment of less than 10,000 people in this industry are not listed individually.

Recent and Proposed Expansions and Contractions of the OEWS

Versions of the OEWS have existed for individual industries since the 1960s, but the program expanded substantially in 1977 to cover all non-agricultural industries.¹⁹ By 1992, it included the agricultural services industry (such as farm labor contractors).²⁰ As part of the Green Goods and Services program, the OEWS was extended to cover farms and ranches in 2011.²¹ However, BLS eliminated the Green Goods and Services program in 2013, along with other programs, to achieve savings required by the sequestration provisions of the Budget Control Act of 2011.²² The President's budget request for FY2024 included \$1,137,000 to restore data collection for farms and ranches in the OEWS program,²³ but this request was not funded.

The Current Population Survey (CPS)

The CPS, conducted by BLS and the Census Bureau, is a survey of about 60,000 households per month. These households are selected from the Census Bureau's Master Address File, a list of residential addresses.²⁴ They are contacted by telephone or in person, and trained interviewers ask many detailed questions to properly classify the labor market activities of each adult in the household whose usual residence is in the United States. This "usual residence" rule excludes H-2A workers from the survey.²⁵ The response rate of this survey has been falling in recent years, and is now about 70%, down from 92% in 2010.²⁶ Versions of the CPS have been conducted since 1940.²⁷

BLS publishes tables of average employment in agriculture and related industries based on the CPS. In these tables, people are only included if agricultural work is their main job during the months they are surveyed. For example, someone who is surveyed during the winter months but works in agriculture only during the summer would not be included in these data. There are also concerns that because it is a survey of residences, the CPS may miss U.S. migrant workers in agriculture.²⁸

¹⁹ Max L. Carey, "Occupational employment growth through 1990," *Monthly Labor Review*, August 1981, pp. 42-55, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/1981/08/art5full.pdf>.

²⁰ DOL, BLS, *Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics: History*, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/hom/oews/history.htm> and *OES Estimates, 1988-1995*, https://www.bls.gov/oes/estimates_88_95.htm.

²¹ Stella D. Fayer, "Agriculture: Occupational Employment and Wages," *Monthly Labor Review*, DOL, BLS, July 2014, <https://doi.org/10.21916/mlr.2014.25>.

²² DOL, BLS, *BLS 2013 Sequestration Information*, March 4, 2013, https://www.bls.gov/bls/sequester_info.htm.

²³ DOL, *FY 2024 Congressional Budget Justification, Bureau of Labor Statistics*, <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/general/budget/2024/CBJ-2024-V3-01.pdf>.

²⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Survey Design and Methodology*, Technical Paper 77, October 2019, <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/methodology/CPS-Tech-Paper-77.pdf>.

²⁵ DOL, BLS, *Monthly Employment Situation Report: Quick Guide to Methods and Measurement Issues*, February 3, 2023, <https://www.bls.gov/bls/empisitquickguide.htm#household> and email to CRS from CPS program staff, September 11, 2023.

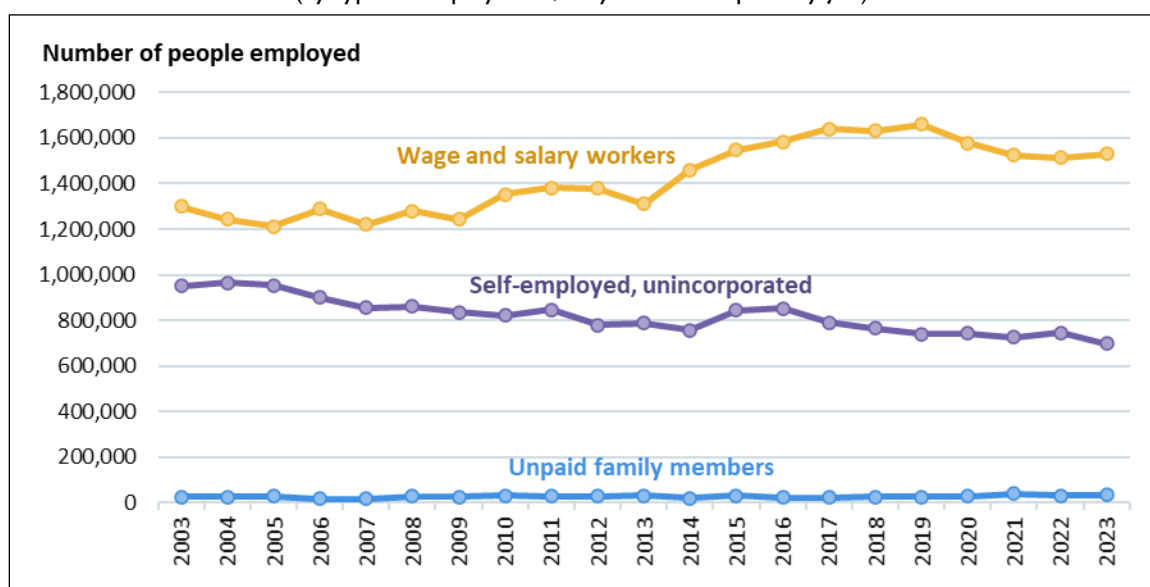
²⁶ DOL, BLS, *CPS (Household Survey) response rate*, <https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNU09300000>.

²⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Survey Design and Methodology*, Technical Paper 77, October 2019, <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/methodology/CPS-Tech-Paper-77.pdf>.

²⁸ Email to CRS from CPS program staff, November 9, 2023.

Figure 2 shows annual agricultural employment averages in the CPS data by type of employment. In 2023, CPS estimates show 2,264,000 people who reported that their main job was in the agricultural sector, of whom most (1,531,000) were wage and salary workers. (Wage and salary positions are the only type of employment counted in either the QCEW or the OEWS.) The CPS also measures employment for self-employed people. Self-employed people in incorporated businesses are considered employees of the business, so only self-employed people in unincorporated businesses are counted separately (there were 698,000 such people working in agriculture in 2023). In recent years, a decreasing number of people report that their primary job is self-employed work in an unincorporated agricultural business. A third type of agricultural employment measured by the CPS (and not by the QCEW or the OEWS) is people employed in an unpaid role in a family business. This type of employment is only included in the CPS tabulations for people who worked at least 15 hours per week in this job during the previous week, who reside in the same household as the business owner, and for whom it is their main job. Decades ago, the CPS measured more than 1 million people employed without pay in family businesses,²⁹ but in 2023 there were less than 100,000 people employed without pay in all types of family businesses, of whom 35,000 worked in agriculture.³⁰

Figure 2. National Employment in the Agricultural Sector in CPS Data
(by type of employment; only included if primary job)



Source: BLS, CPS.

Notes: CPS employment data include people in their main job only.

The American Community Survey (ACS)

The ACS, conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, is a survey of the U.S. population designed for collecting information for small geographic areas between decennial population censuses and for collecting more information than the decennial population censuses. Conducted since 2005 (after

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ DOL, BLS, Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, Household Data, Annual Averages, Table 15. Employed persons in agriculture and nonagricultural industries by age, sex, and class of worker, January 26, 2024, <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat15.htm>.

pilot tests and demonstrations from 2000 to 2004),³¹ it now has a sample size of about 3.54 million addresses per year (295,000 per month) in the United States, as well as 36,000 addresses per year in Puerto Rico.³² The surveyed addresses are selected from the Census Bureau’s Master Address File, a list of all known residential addresses.³³ The response rate for the ACS in 2022 for the United States was 84.4% (a decline from response rates above 97% until 2012).³⁴ There are concerns about addresses being disproportionately absent from the sample frame in rural areas—sometimes because new housing units in these areas do not have a house number or street name in data the Census Bureau receives from the U.S. Postal Service.³⁵

For each person currently residing at a surveyed address, the ACS asks questions about the total amount of wages earned in the past 12 months, the kind of business or industry in which employed people worked, each person’s main occupation, whether each person was born in the United States or elsewhere, and each person’s citizenship status. The ACS questionnaire is designed for self-response by mail or internet. Many ACS estimates are published for areas with 65,000 or more people based on each individual year of data collection, and for all counties based on five years of data collection.³⁶ The ACS considers anyone who expects to stay at an address for two months or more a “current resident,”³⁷ and so it should include H-2A workers who are staying at a surveyed address for at least a two-month period—if they respond to the survey. This is different from the “usual residence” rule of the CPS.

The ACS program publishes annual tabulations of people who work in the combined Agricultural and Mining sectors. They also publish de-identified microdata so researchers can use these data without revealing individuals’ information. CRS used these publicly available ACS microdata to create **Figure 3**, showing annual employment averages in the ACS data by nativity and citizenship status. This figure shows that most people for whom agricultural work is their primary job are native born, while the number of foreign-born, noncitizen workers in this sector has been falling in recent years.

³¹ Christopher Martin and Sharon A. Tosi Lacey, *History of the American Community Survey*, U.S. Census Bureau, January 2024, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/2024/acs/history-of-the-ac.pdf>.

³² U.S. Census Bureau, *ACS and PRCS Survey Design and Methodology*, Version 3.0, November 2022, p. 4-1, https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/methodology/design_and_methodology/2022/acs_design_methodology_report_2022.pdf.

³³ Christopher Martin and Sharon A. Tosi Lacey, *History of the American Community Survey*, U.S. Census Bureau, January 2024, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/2024/acs/history-of-the-ac.pdf>.

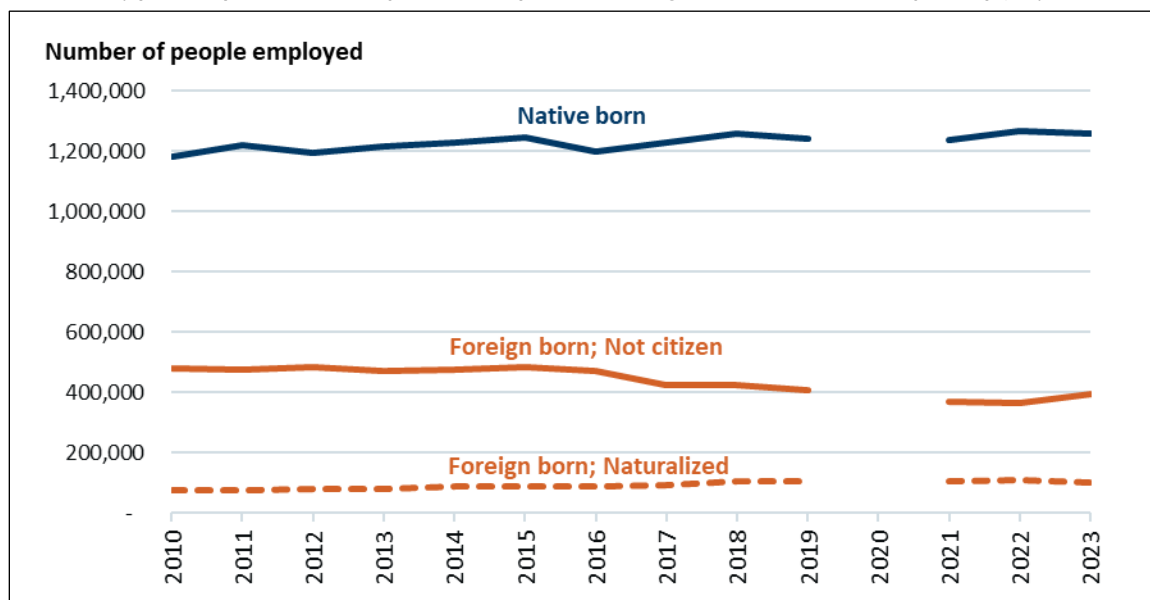
³⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey: Response Rates*, <https://www.census.gov/acs/www/methodology/sample-size-and-data-quality/response-rates/>.

³⁵ Larry Bates and Jim Hartman, *Research on Master Address File Quality—Implications for the American Community Survey*, U.S. Census Bureau, DSSD 2012 American Community Survey Research Memorandum Series ACS12-R-01, February 3, 2012, https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/working-papers/2012/acs/2012_Bates_01.pdf.

³⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, *Understanding and Using American Community Survey Data: What All Data Users Need to Know*, September 2020, https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/acs/acs_general_handbook_2020.pdf.

³⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, *ACS and PRCS Survey Design and Methodology*, Version 3.0, November 2022, p. 6-2, https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/methodology/design_and_methodology/2022/acs_design_methodology_report_2022.pdf.

Figure 3. National Employment in the Agricultural Sector in ACS Data
(by nativity and citizenship status; only included if agricultural work is the primary job)



Source: CRS tabulations of data from the Census Bureau, ACS.

Notes: Data for 2020 are omitted due to data issues associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Coverage of Employment in Agricultural Statistics

In addition to the measures of agricultural employment in data used more generally for measuring employment and the characteristics of workers in the United States, there are measures of agricultural employment in data specific to the Agricultural Sector. This section of the report describes these data sources and what each source shows about agricultural employment.

Census of Agriculture (COA)

The COA, conducted by the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) within USDA, is a complete count of U.S. farms and ranches and the people who operate them. It has been conducted in various forms for nearly 200 years and currently occurs at five-year intervals. Results from the 2022 COA were released in February 2024 (results for Puerto Rico were released in July 2024; results for Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands are to be released in 2025). Results of previous censuses are often available at the county level.³⁸

The COA reports the number and characteristics of Producers (i.e., farm operators), defined as people “involved in making decisions for the farm operation.... [They] may be the owner, a member of the owner’s household, a hired manager, a tenant, a renter, or a sharecropper.”³⁹ The 2022 COA reports 3,374,044 farm operators in the United States in that year, compared with 3,399,834 in the 2017 COA. Of these people, the 2022 COA reports 174,308 were hired

³⁸ USDA-NASS, *Census of Agriculture: 2022 Publications*, <https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/>.

³⁹ USDA-NASS, *United States 2022 Census of Agriculture: Appendix B. General Explanation and Census of Agriculture Report Form*, February 2024, p. B-16, https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_US/usappxb.pdf.

managers, an increase from 158,298 in the 2017 COA. 1,415,315 reported that farming was their primary occupation (similar to the 1,416,848 reporting this in the 2017 COA). 2,377,305 reported that they resided on the farm they operated (a decline from 2,530,442 in the 2017 COA).⁴⁰ These counts are available by county.

The 2022 COA contains a short section on farm labor. It asks the total number of directly hired farm or ranch workers employed during 2022, in two categories—the number of hired workers who worked less than 150 days, and the number who worked 150 days or more. It also asks the number of unpaid farm or ranch workers. It does not ask whether this was the main job for any of these workers, or about their nativity, citizenship, or visa status.⁴¹

Employment numbers from the COA are not comparable to employment numbers presented previously in this report, because employment numbers in the COA are counts per farm or ranch. If a hired worker or an unpaid family member works on more than one farm during a Census year, they will be counted more than once.

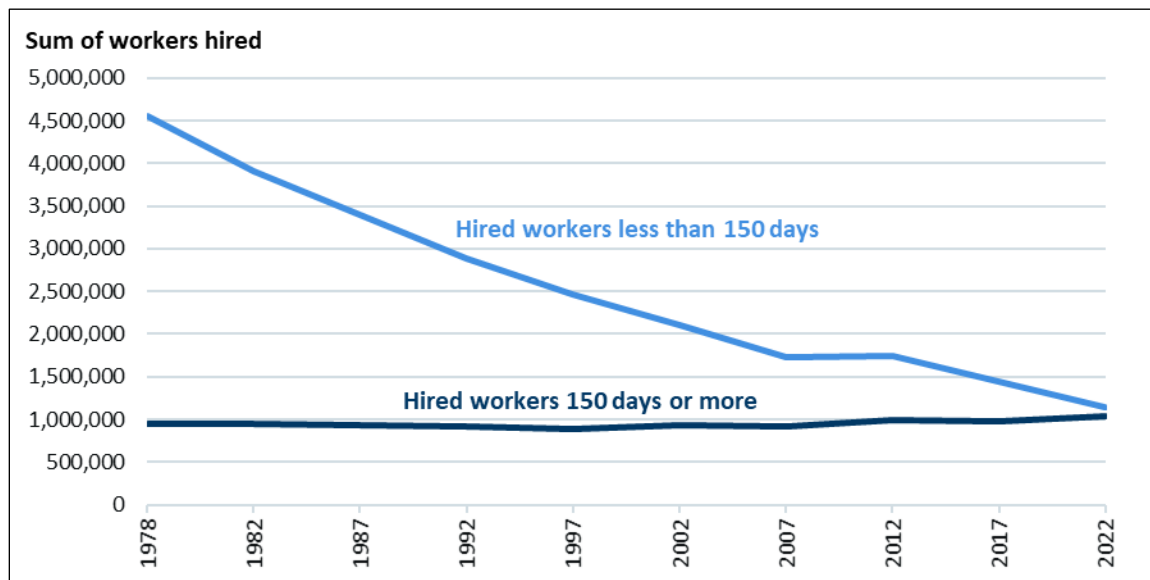
Figure 4 shows the employment of Hired Farm and Ranch Workers in COA data. These estimates do not include employees of farm labor contractors. This figure shows a long-term decline in hiring agricultural workers for less than 150 days on farms and ranches. This decline in short spells of directly hired employment has been attributed to the increased difficulty for Mexican farmworkers to cross the border into the United States for short-term jobs without legal authorization, the aging of the U.S. farm workforce, the growing share of the U.S. farm workforce that is married and has children, increased mechanization of activities formerly done by farmworkers, and an expansion of farm employment during winter months.⁴²

⁴⁰ USDA-NASS, *2022 Census of Agriculture - UNITED STATES DATA, Table 52. Selected Producer Characteristics: 2022 and 2017*, February 13, 2024, https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_US/st99_1_052_052.pdf.

⁴¹ USDA-NASS, *UNITED STATES 2022 CENSUS OF AGRICULTURE: Report Form*, September 20, 2021, https://www.nass.usda.gov/AgCensus/Report_Form_and_Instructions/2022_Report_Form/2022_CoA_Questionnaire_Final.pdf.

⁴² Maoyong Fan et al., “Why Do Fewer Agricultural Workers Migrate Now?,” *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, vol. 97, no. 3 (April 2015), pp. 665-679, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ajae/aau115> and Zachariah Rutledge and Philip Martin. 2023. “More Jobs and Less Seasonal Employment in California Agriculture since 1990.” *California Agriculture* 77 (2): 49–56, <https://doi.org/10.3733/ca.2023a0008>.

Figure 4. National Employment of Hired Farm and Ranch Workers in COA Data
(by length of employment)



Source: USDA-NASS, COA.

Notes: Hired workers may be counted multiple times if they worked on more than one farm or ranch during a COA year. Employees of farm labor contractors are not included.

The Farm Labor Survey (FLS)

The Agricultural Labor Survey (often called the Farm Labor Survey, or FLS) is conducted by NASS. The FLS is a survey of farm and ranch operators conducted semiannually in April and October (except in California, where state funding allows it to be conducted more frequently). In 2023, it had a sample size of 16,309 farms or ranches and a response rate of 43.9%.⁴³ Farm and ranch operators are asked to provide, by occupation, the number of hired workers, the total hours worked by these individuals, and the total weekly gross wages paid to each occupation during the second weeks of January, April, July, and October. The survey includes information on the employment and wages of workers on H-2A visas who are employed directly by farm and ranch operators included in the survey sample.

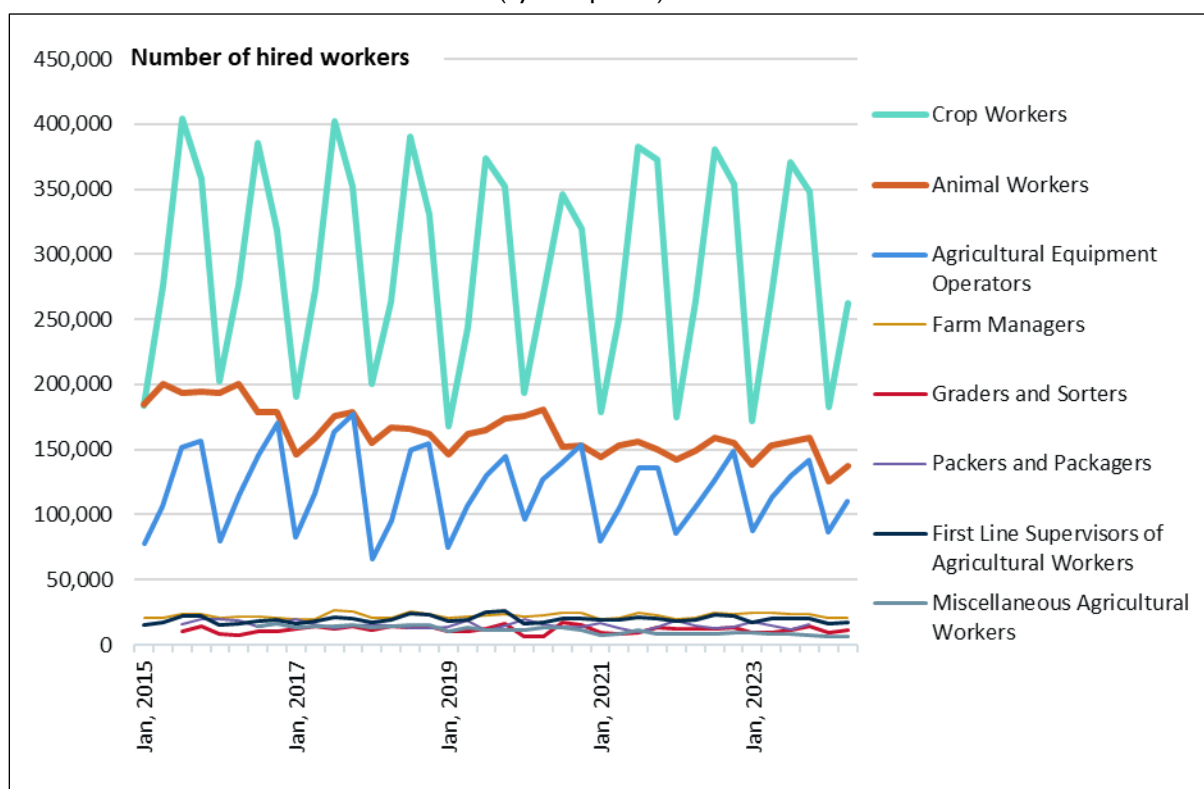
NASS uses these data to estimate the employment, average hours, and gross wages of hired workers in January and April (published in May) and in July and October (published in November). These estimates are published in the semiannual *Farm Labor Report*. Separate employment estimates are published for individual occupations at the national level, but at the regional level the *Farm Labor Report* contains employment estimates only by whether or not the person filling out the form expects these people to be employed for 150 days or more.

⁴³ USDA-NASS, *Farm Labor Methodology and Quality Measures*, November 22, 2023, https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Methodology_and_Data_Quality/Farm_Labor/11_2023/fmlaqm23.pdf. Like most federal surveys, the FLS has declining response rates in recent years; the response rate in 2013 was 65% as reported in USDA-NASS, *Farm Labor Methodology and Quality Measures*, December 5, 2013, https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Methodology_and_Data_Quality/Farm_Labor/12_2013/LABQM.pdf.

As a survey of farm and ranch operators, the FLS does not collect information on the employment or wages of farm and ranch workers who are employed by farm labor contractors.⁴⁴ It also does not collect information from farm or ranch operators in Alaska or U.S. territories.

Figure 5 shows the employment of directly hired workers on farms and ranches in FLS data, by occupation. This figure shows that employment of Crop Workers and of Agricultural Equipment Operators is much more seasonal than employment of Animal Workers, and there has been a long-term decline in the number of Animal Workers directly employed by farms and ranches in the United States.

Figure 5. National Employment of Hired Farm and Ranch Workers in FLS Data
(by occupation)



Source: USDA-NASS, FLS.

Notes: The FLS does not include farm labor contractors or operations in Alaska or U.S. territories. It does include workers on H-2A visas.

Recent Expansions and Suspensions of the FLS

Versions of the FLS have existed since the 1930s, although the scale of the survey and the specific questions asked and tables published have changed over time. In May 2011, NASS announced its intent to suspend the survey due to budget constraints.⁴⁵ This suspension was

⁴⁴ In 2022, the QCEW showed 15% of jobs covered by UI in the agricultural sector were in farm labor contractors.

⁴⁵ USDA-NASS, "Notice of Intent to Suspend the Agricultural Labor Survey and Farm Labor Reports," 76 *Federal Register* 28730, May 18, 2011, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2011-05-18/pdf/2011-12255.pdf>.

reversed in June 2011 due to funding from DOL.⁴⁶ In 2018 and 2019, NASS attempted several expansions of the FLS, but in September 2020 it announced its intent to suspend the FLS.⁴⁷ The United Farm Workers sued USDA to block this suspension, citing the use of the FLS in labor certification for the H-2A visa program. The United States District Court for the Eastern District of California granted a preliminary injunction in the case, ruling that USDA was required to conduct the FLS.⁴⁸ NASS reinstated the FLS in December 2020⁴⁹ and DOL stopped funding it. The FLS returned to the smaller sample size⁵⁰ and the information provided in the *Farm Labor Report* reverted to the smaller set of items published before 2019, with funding provided by USDA. (More information about the changes to the FLS during 2018-2020 is described in the companion report to this one, CRS Report R47944, *Measuring Wages in the Agricultural Sector for the H-2A Visa Program*.)

The National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS)

The NAWS is funded by the Employment and Training Administration (ETA) within DOL and is conducted by JBS International, Inc., a management and information technology consulting firm.⁵¹ DOL-ETA developed this survey in response to Section 303 of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which directs the Secretaries of Labor and Agriculture to determine whether there is a shortage of workers to perform seasonal agricultural services in the United States.⁵² This survey interviews 1,500 to 3,600 field workers active in crop agriculture over two-year periods in the contiguous United States. In addition to excluding animal production workers and all workers in Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and other U.S. territories from its sample, the NAWS does not collect data from temporary foreign workers (such as H-2A visa holders) in any state.⁵³ However, in a recent *Federal Register* Notice, DOL-ETA requested approval to include H-2A crop workers in future NAWS surveys.⁵⁴

This survey does not produce estimates of agricultural employment. However, it asks farmworkers questions not found in any of the other surveys described in this report, such as how long have they been doing farm work, what other jobs they hold, and their legal status.⁵⁵

DOL-ETA periodically publishes tables of the demographic and employment characteristics of NAWS respondents, based on at least two years of data collection. It also publishes de-identified

⁴⁶ USDA-NASS, “Notice of Intent to Resume the Agricultural Labor Survey and Farm Labor Reports,” 76 *Federal Register* 38110, June 29, 2011, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2011-06-29/pdf/2011-16249.pdf>.

⁴⁷ USDA-NASS, “Notice of Revision to the Agricultural Labor Survey and Farm Labor Reports by Suspending Data Collection for October 2020,” 85 *Federal Register* 61419, September 30, 2020, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2020-09-30/pdf/2020-21592.pdf>.

⁴⁸ *United Farm Workers v. Perdue* (E.D. Cal Oct. 28, 2020).

⁴⁹ USDA-NASS, “Notice of Reinstatement of the Agricultural Labor Survey Previously Scheduled for October 2020,” 85 *Federal Register* 79463, December 10, 2020.

⁵⁰ USDA-NASS, *Farm Labor Methodology and Quality Measures*, November 24, 2021, https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/Methodology_and_Data_Quality/Farm_Labor/11_2021/flqm1121.pdf.

⁵¹ Letter from Susan M. Gabbard, Project Director, to Sample Agricultural Employer, https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/naws/pdfs/NAWS_Sample_Letter_to_Agricultural_Employer.pdf.

⁵² E-mail to CRS from DOL, September 27, 2023.

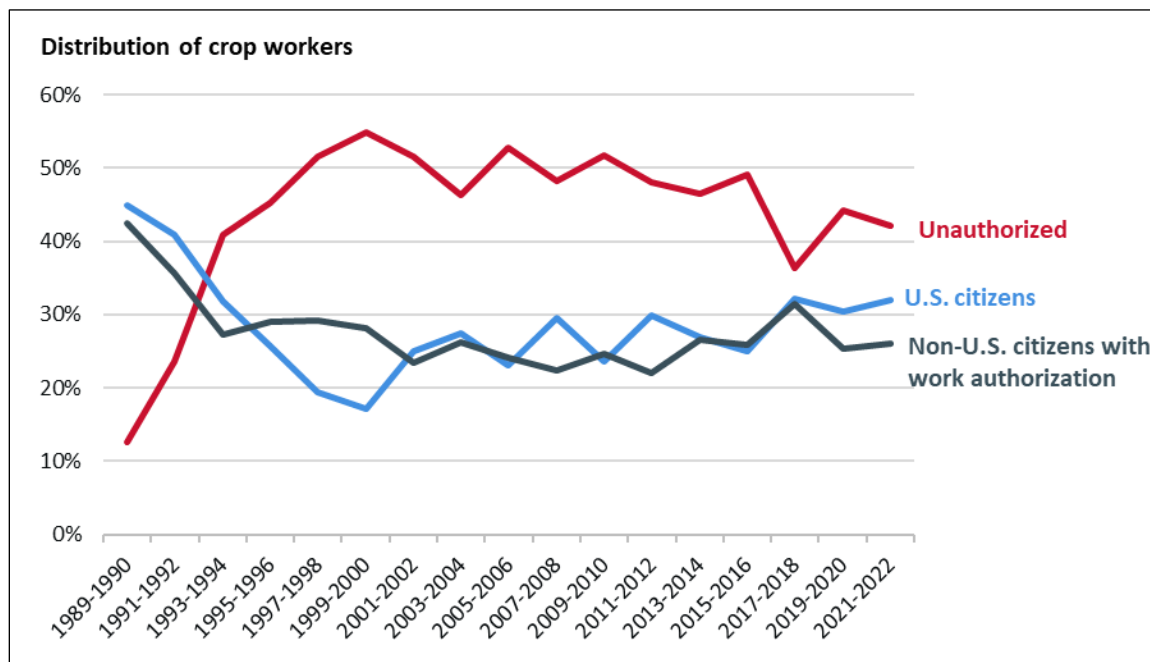
⁵³ DOL-ETA, *Statistical Methods of the National Agricultural Workers Survey*, https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/naws/pdfs/NAWS_Statistical_Methods_AKA_Supporting_Statement_Part_B.pdf.

⁵⁴ DOL-ETA, “Agency Information Collection Activities; Comment Request; National Agricultural Workers Survey,” 89 *Federal Register* 40507-40508, May 10, 2024.

⁵⁵ DOL-ETA, *Justification for the National Agricultural Workers Survey*, https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/naws/pdfs/NAWS_Justification.pdf.

microdata so researchers can use these data without revealing individuals' information. **Figure 6** shows the distribution of crop workers' answers to the question about legal status over time. This question is not asked in any other federal survey of farmworkers. The figure shows a sharp increase in the percentage of crop workers without legal authorization to work in the United States between 1990 and 2000, and then a decline in more recent years.

Figure 6. Distribution of Crop Workers by Legal Status in NAWS Data, 1989-2022



Source: NAWS tabulations from ETA, accessed at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/national-agricultural-workers-survey/naws-data-finder>.

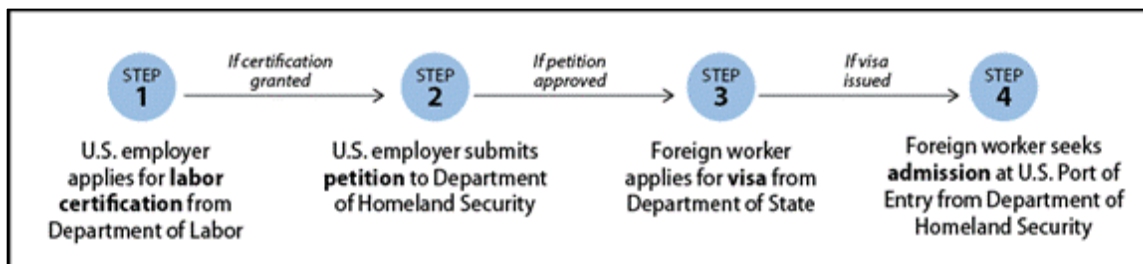
Notes: These data do not include animal workers, workers in Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and other U.S. territories, or workers on H-2A visas.

H-2A Visa Program Data

Hiring workers through the H-2A program is a multistep process involving several government agencies (**Figure 7**).⁵⁶ Employers who want to hire workers through the H-2A program must first apply for labor certification to the Office of Foreign Labor Certification (OFLC) within DOL. This involves posting the job order (including the offer of wages at or above a required wage rate) through a State Workforce Agency in an attempt to recruit U.S. workers, and receiving certification that there are not enough U.S. workers available for the job at the offered wage rate. After receiving this certification, a prospective H-2A employer can submit a petition to DHS's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to sponsor foreign workers. If this petition is approved, foreign workers abroad may apply at a U.S. consulate for an H-2A nonimmigrant visa from DOS, allowing them to seek admission to the United States and commence employment.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ This is described in more detail in CRS Report R44849, *H-2A and H-2B Temporary Worker Visas: Policy and Related Issues*. There is also a guide to the program written by USDA for potential employers at <https://www.farmers.gov/working-with-us/h2a-visa-program>.

⁵⁷ USDA, *H-2A Visa Program*, <https://www.farmers.gov/working-with-us/h2a-visa-program>.

Figure 7. Steps Involved in Bringing H-2A Workers to the United States

Source: CRS presentation of information from DHS, USCIS.

Each of the agencies involved in the H-2A program produces data about the employers and/or workers involved at its step of the H-2A hiring process. However, no agency produces comprehensive data on the employers and workers who complete the H-2A hiring process.

Data from the Office of Foreign Labor Certification (OFLC)

Employers must apply for and obtain labor certification before they can apply for H-2A visas. DOL-OFLC publishes data from 2008 through the last completed fiscal year on these certification applications.⁵⁸ Included in these data are the name and address of every employer applying for this labor certification, date of their application, number of worker visas they are requesting, type (or crop) of agricultural activity involved in the work, title of the agricultural job, wages offered, work schedule, job requirements, housing and meals provided to workers, and location of the worksite.

In a study published in 2021,⁵⁹ USDA economists Castillo, Simnitt, Astill, and Minor analyzed OFLC labor certification data for 2010 through 2019. They documented a positive relationship between the size of a state's hired agricultural workforce (as measured in the QCEW) and the number of labor certification applications for H-2A visas. Southeastern states used the H-2A program more intensively than other regions, and states such as Florida, Washington, Nevada, and Louisiana used the H-2A program more intensively than California or Texas.

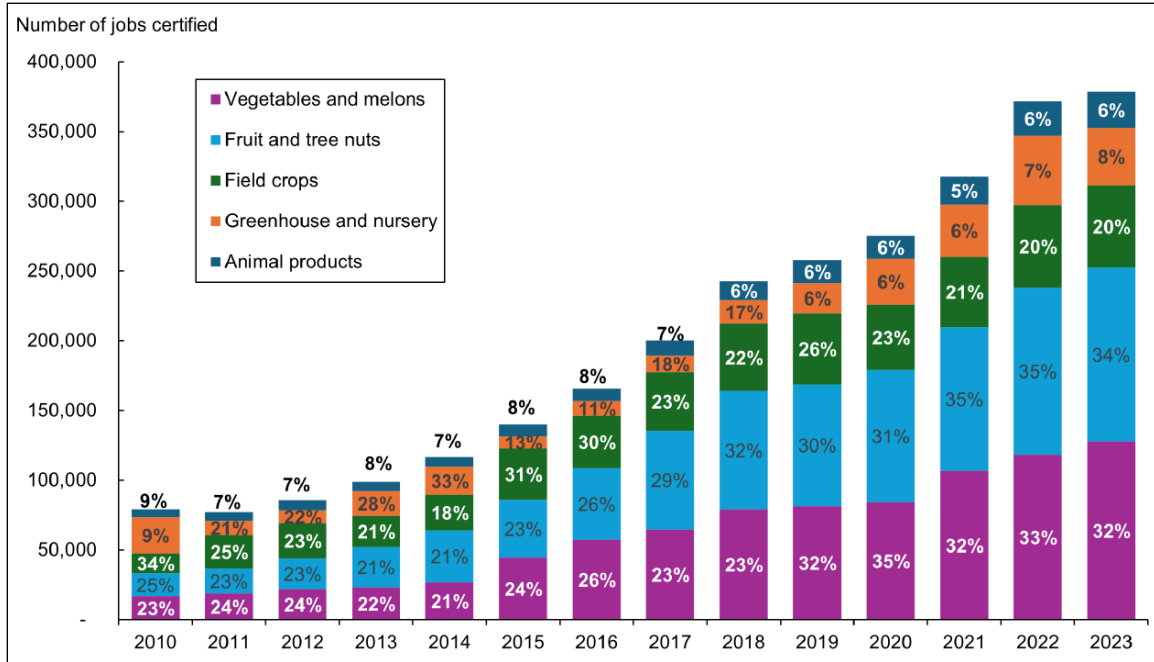
Simnitt and Castillo extend this analysis through 2023.⁶⁰ As shown in **Figure 8**, they find the increase in the number of positions certified for the H-2A program from 2010 through 2023 was most pronounced for work in agricultural industries with high labor requirements and seasonal labor demand, such as the fruit and tree nuts and vegetables and melons sectors. They also find the share of H-2A certified workers by farm labor contractors increased from 9% in 2013 to more than 40% by 2018 and has remained at this level. This increase was most pronounced in the labor-intensive fruit and tree nuts and vegetables and melons sectors.

⁵⁸ DOL, ETA, OFLC, *Performance Data*, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/foreign-labor/performance>.

⁵⁹ Marcelo Castillo, Skyler Simnitt, and Gregory Astill, and Travis Minor, *Examining the Growth in Seasonal Agricultural H-2A Labor*, ERS, Economic Information Bulletin No. (EIB-226), August 2021, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=102014>.

⁶⁰ Skyler Simnitt and Marcelo Castillo, *Labor Contractors in U.S. Agriculture: Recent Trends and H-2A Program Usage*, unpublished working paper, September 2024.

Figure 8. H-2A Certified Workers by Crop Type in OFLC Data, 2010-2023



Source: Figure 4 of Skyler Simnitt and Marcelo Castillo, *Labor Contractors in U.S. Agriculture: Recent Trends and H-2A Program Usage*, unpublished working paper, September 2024.

Notes: This figure attributes H-2A requests certified for farm labor contractor employers to the crop type for which these workers would be working. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding. Employers do not always hire as many H-2A workers as OFLC certifies them to hire.

Data from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

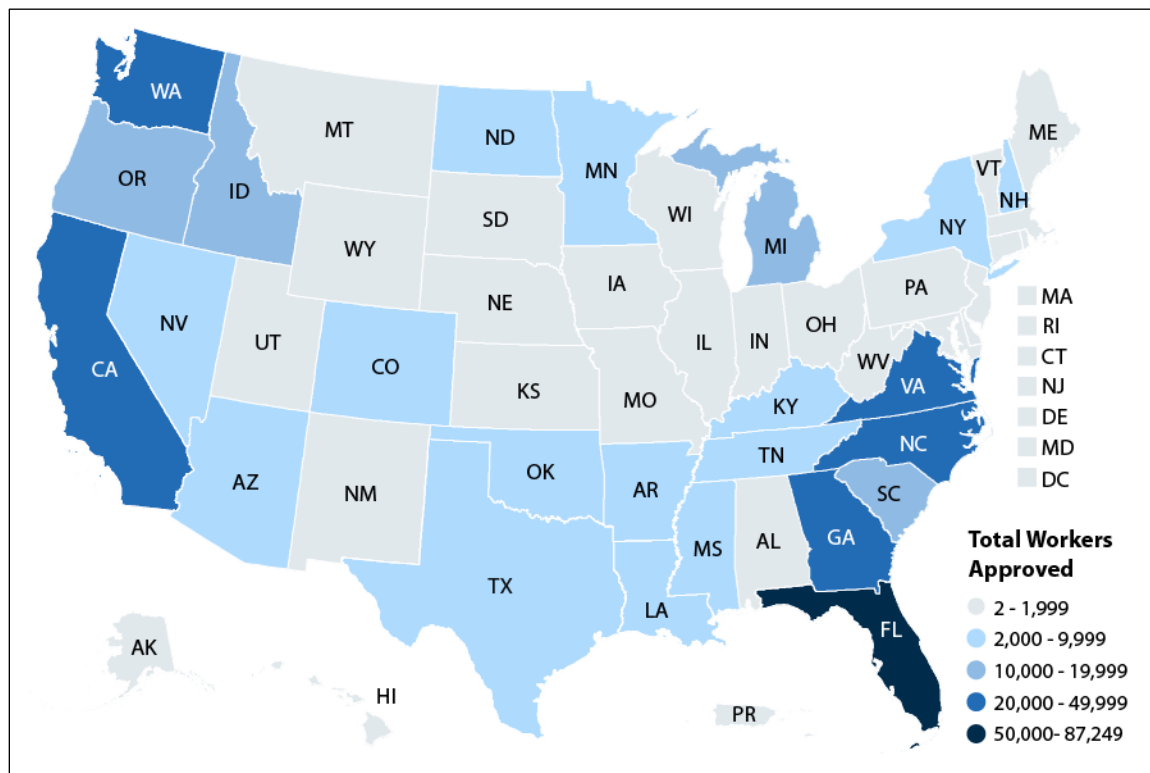
Employers must petition USCIS for approval to hire H-2A workers. USCIS publishes data on employer petitions for the H-2A visas and the approval or denial decisions on them.⁶¹ These data include the type of petition (petitions for new employment or continuing employment), the location of the work, and the number of workers approved. These data are available since FY2015.

Figure 9 uses these USCIS data to show the number of approved workers on petitions for H-2A visas in FY2023 by state (plus Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico). The states with the most approved workers were Florida (60,867), California (37,429), North Carolina (34,084), Washington (29,490), and Georgia (25,489).⁶²

⁶¹ DHS, USCIS, *Understanding our H-2A Employer Data Hub*, <https://www.uscis.gov/tools/reports-and-studies/h-2a-employer-data-hub/understanding-our-h-2a-employer-data-hub>.

⁶² DHS, USCIS, *H-2A Employer Data Hub*, <https://www.uscis.gov/tools/reports-and-studies/h-2a-employer-data-hub>.

Figure 9. Number of H-2A Visas Approved by USCIS in FY2023
(by state/territory)



Source: CRS tabulation of data from the USCIS H-2A Employer Data Hub.

Notes: Employers do not always hire as many workers on H-2A visas as USCIS approves.

Data from the Department of State

The Bureau of Consular Affairs in DOS issues visas to foreign workers. Until this step in the H-2A hiring process, most of the fees involved are flat fees per application or per petition, and employers may apply for as many workers as they might possibly need. However, costs involved with H-2A visa applications, agent fees, and transportation to worksites in the United States are costs per worker.⁶³ Every year, there are more H-2A labor certification applications and H-2A petitions for initial employment approved than there are H-2A visas issued.

The Bureau of Consular Affairs publishes data on the number of visas issued annually, by visa type and the nationality of the person receiving the visa.⁶⁴ As shown in **Figure 10**, the total number of H-2A visas issued per year has increased from 30,201 in 2000⁶⁵ to 310,676 in 2023.⁶⁶

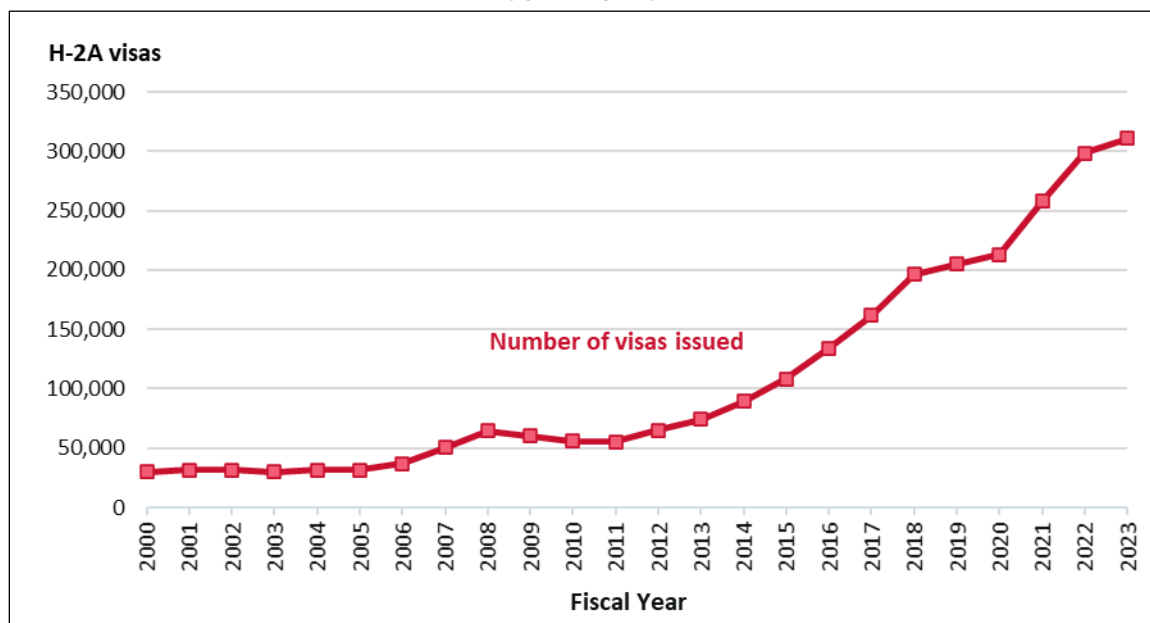
⁶³ USDA, *H-2A Visa Program*, <https://www.farmers.gov/working-with-us/h2a-visa-program>.

⁶⁴ DOS, Bureau of Consular Affairs, *Visa Statistics*, <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/legal/visa-law0/visa-statistics.html>.

⁶⁵ DOS, Bureau of Consular Affairs, *Report of the Visa Office 2000*, Table XVI(B), “Nonimmigrant Visas Issued by Classification,” <https://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/Statistics/FY2000%20table%20XVI.pdf>.

⁶⁶ DOS, Bureau of Consular Affairs, *Report of the Visa Office 2023*, Table XV(B), “Nonimmigrant Visas Issued by Classification,” https://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/Statistics/AnnualReports/FY2023AnnualReport/FY2023_AR_TableXVB.pdf.

Figure 10. Number of H-2A Visas Issued
(by fiscal year)



Source: CRS tabulation of data from DOS, Bureau of Consular Affairs, *Report of the Visa Office*, selected years.

Bureau of Consular Affairs data also show that the countries whose nationals were issued the greatest numbers of H-2A visas in 2023 were Mexico (284,247), South Africa (12,762), Jamaica (4,653), Guatemala (3,600), and Nicaragua (1,166).⁶⁷

Summary Tables

Table 3 provides a comparison of the agricultural employment data sources discussed in this report. It shows the coverage, scale of collection, type of employment measured, and detail of published estimates for each source.

⁶⁷ DOS, Bureau of Consular Affairs, Monthly Nonimmigrant Visa Issuance Statistics, <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/legal/visa-law0/visa-statistics/nonimmigrant-visa-statistics/monthly-nonimmigrant-visa-issuances.html>.

Table 3. Comparison of Selected Sources of Agricultural Employment Data

Source	Coverage	Scale of Current Data Collection	Employment Measured	Detail of Published Estimates for Agriculture
<p>The Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) Conducted by BLS, https://www.bls.gov/cew/</p>	Employers covered by UI, including larger farms and larger farm labor contractors (coverage varies by state).	Quarterly reports from all employers covered by UI.	Number of people on payroll who are covered by UI. Does not include workers on H-2A visas in states such as Florida, where they are not covered by UI. It also does not include short-term employees on small farms in most states.	Monthly employment by detailed industry is published every quarter at the county level.
<p>The Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) Conducted by BLS, https://www.bls.gov/oes/</p>	Workers employed by nonfarm employers and covered by state unemployment insurance (UI) programs, or employed in rail transportation.	1.1 million nonfarm business establishments over a three-year period in all U.S. states and DC. Data also collected in Puerto Rico, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.	Average annual employment by detailed occupation for people on nonfarm payrolls who are covered by UI. This does not include workers on H-2A visas in states such as Florida where they are not covered by UI.	National estimates by industry, including nonfarm agricultural support industries are published annually. No agriculture-specific estimates published for U.S. territories.
<p>The Current Population Survey (CPS) Conducted by the Census Bureau in coordination with BLS, https://www.bls.gov/cps/</p>	People who usually reside in the surveyed household. This does not include people on H-2A visas.	60,000 households per month in the United States.	Number of usual residents employed (in their main job). It does not include workers on H-2A visas because their usual residence is outside the United States.	Average employment by occupation in main job in the United States published annually.
<p>The American Community Survey (ACS) Conducted by the Census Bureau, https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs</p>	People who reside in the United States and have been (or will be) living in the surveyed household or group quarters for at least two months.	295,000 addresses per month in the United States, as well as 36,000 addresses per year in Puerto Rico.	Number of people employed (in their main job). It will include workers on H-2A visas if they are living in a surveyed address for at least two months and respond to the survey.	No agricultural-specific estimates are published, but annual public data releases allow users to make their own tabulations.

Source	Coverage	Scale of Current Data Collection	Employment Measured	Detail of Published Estimates for Agriculture
<p>The Census of Agriculture (COA) Conducted by NASS, https://www.nass.usda.gov/AgCensus/</p>	<p>All farms and ranches identified in the United States and its territories.</p>	<p>Questionnaires mailed out every five years to approximately 1.9 million farms and ranches in 2022.</p>	<p>Questions asked about the characteristics of farm or ranch operators (Producers), including whether they are hired managers; number of directly hired laborers; and number of unpaid family workers. Workers may be double counted if they work on more than one farm or ranch.</p>	<p>Data published at the county level every five years.</p>
<p>The Farm Labor Survey (FLS) Conducted by NASS, https://www.nass.usda.gov/Surveys/Guide_to_NASS_Surveys/Farm_Labor/</p>	<p>Workers employed directly on farms and ranches (not employed by farm labor contractors).</p>	<p>About 16,000 farm and ranch operators in the continental United States and Hawaii every six months.</p>	<p>Number of directly hired farm and ranch workers, including workers on H-2A work visas.</p>	<p>State- or region-level estimates of all directly hired workers and nation-level estimates by occupation published twice annually.</p>
<p>The National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) Funded by the ETA, https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/national-agricultural-workers-survey</p>	<p>U.S. field workers active in crop production in the contiguous 48 states.</p>	<p>1,500 to 3,600 field workers over a two-year period.</p>	<p>This is not a source of data on overall employment—but it is a source of data on the characteristics of U.S. field workers (not including workers on H-2A visas).</p>	<p>Characteristics are published periodically for U.S. regions and California.</p>
<p>H-2A labor certification approval data from OFLC https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/foreign-labor/performance</p>	<p>Employer applications for labor certification to bring in workers on H-2A visas.</p>	<p>Program data published quarterly.</p>	<p>Employer applications for H-2A visa labor certification. Employers do not always hire as many H-2A workers as they are certified to hire.</p>	<p>Number of H-2A workers requested by location, employer type, and crop.</p>
<p>H-2A visa petition data from USCIS https://www.uscis.gov/tools/reports-and-studies/h-2a-employer-data-hub</p>	<p>Employer petitions to bring in workers on H-2A visas.</p>	<p>Program data published annually.</p>	<p>Employer petitions for H-2A visas. Employers do not always hire as many H-2A workers as they are approved to hire.</p>	<p>Number of H-2A workers requested by location and whether new or continuing.</p>

Source	Coverage	Scale of Current Data Collection	Employment Measured	Detail of Published Estimates for Agriculture
H-2A visa issuance data from the Bureau of Consular Affairs https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/legal/visa-law0/visa-statistics.html	Actual visas issued.	Program data published monthly.	H-2A visas issued.	Number of H-2A worker visas issued by month and country of origin.

Source: CRS compilation based on the sources cited in the table.

Table 4 provides a listing of these employment data sources by the group of workers and employers whose employment they measure. There are multiple sources of data on the employment of domestic agricultural workers. Some data on employment of hired workers on farms and ranches include H-2A workers. However, in many states the only employment data on H-2A workers employed by farm labor contractors or growers’ associations comes from H-2A program administrative data.

Table 4. Sources of Agricultural Employment Data by Worker and Employer Group

Population of Agricultural Workers and Their Employers	Sources Measuring Employment of this Population—and Limitations
Self-employed farmers and ranchers	Current Population Survey (CPS)—if this is the worker’s main job. American Community Survey (ACS)—if this is the worker’s main job. Census of Agriculture (COA)—includes people for whom agricultural work is a second job or a hobby. Hired farm managers should be subtracted from COA farm and ranch operator (Producer) totals to estimate employment of the self-employed.
Domestic hired workers on farms and ranches	Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW)—if the farm’s employment is large enough to require coverage by state UI programs, with requirements varying by state. CPS—if this is the worker’s main job. ACS—if this is the worker’s main job. COA—domestic and H-2A workers are not measured separately; includes people for whom farm work is a second job. Farm Labor Survey (FLS)—domestic and H-2A workers are not measured separately.
Domestic hired workers of farm labor contractors or growers’ associations	QCEW—if the employer is large enough to require coverage by state UI programs, with requirements varying by state. Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics Program (OEWS)—if the employer is large enough to require coverage by state UI programs, with requirements varying by state. CPS—if this is the worker’s main job. ACS—if this is the worker’s main job.

Population of Agricultural Workers and Their Employers	Sources Measuring Employment of this Population— and Limitations
H-2A workers on farms and ranches	<p>QCEW—if the farm’s employment is large enough to require coverage by state UI programs and the state includes H-2A workers in UI, with requirements varying by state.</p> <p>ACS—domestic and H-2A workers are not measured separately.</p> <p>COA—domestic and H-2A workers are not measured separately.</p> <p>FLS—domestic and H-2A workers are not measured separately.</p> <p>H-2A visa program data—OFLC data (which separate potential employers by whether they are an individual farm, a growers’ association, or a farm labor contractor) measure the number of labor certifications, not the number of visas issued, while State Department data (which count the number of visas issued) do not separate employers by type or work location.</p>
H-2A workers for farm labor contractors or growers’ associations	<p>QCEW—if employment is large enough to require coverage by state UI programs and the state includes H-2A workers in UI, with requirements varying by state.</p> <p>OEWS—if the employer is large enough to require coverage by state UI programs and the state includes H-2A workers in UI, with requirements varying by state.</p> <p>ACS—domestic and H-2A workers are not measured separately.</p> <p>H-2A visa program data—OFLC data (which separate potential employers by whether they are an individual farm, a growers’ association, or a farm labor contractor) measure the number of labor certifications, not the number of visas issued, while State Department data (which count the number of visas issued) do not separate employers by type or work location.</p>
Unpaid family workers on farms and ranches	<p>CPS—if this is the worker’s main job, they work without pay on a farm owned by a family member in the same household, and they work at least 15 hours per week in this job.</p> <p>ACS—if this is the worker’s main job and they work at least 15 hours per week in this job.</p> <p>COA—includes people for whom agricultural work is a second job or a hobby, regardless of the number of hours worked.</p>

Source: CRS compilation based on the sources cited in the table.

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