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Farm labor: more questions than answers

The current interest in the displacement of farm workers by machines should draw our attention to what may be an even more serious problem, the basic unemployment patterns of farm workers in California. There is widespread conviction that this problem is one of the most critical facing our rural communities, yet data that would enable us to describe it in even the most approximate terms is virtually nonexistent and difficult to obtain.

Nevertheless, one of the most compelling informational needs we have about California agriculture is more accurate and complete data on the labor force employed on California farms. At present we know little about such things as how many individuals work on California farms in the course of a year, or how many want employment only part of a year. How much income do farm workers earn per day, per month, and per year? How many years have the workers spent in school? How old are the workers? If the farm workers have more than one job during a year, how many and what kinds of jobs do they have in that period? How do farm workers find jobs? There are many other questions about farm workers that need answers on a regular annual basis.

Most of the attention that has been given to farm labor data has been directed toward estimates of employment and improvements in the accuracy of these estimates. Currently published employment data provide us with useful information about the farm labor force, particularly with regard to seasonal workers, but even the relatively informative employment data now available do not provide the kind of information needed to answer the questions posed above. It is clear that we need more and different kinds of data before we can accurately describe the characteristics of the labor force employed on California farms.

Occasionally special studies have thrown some light on the labor force and its work experience, and from them it has been possible to glean some important facts about farm workers. For example, one study published about a decade ago analyzed the California farm labor force of 1965, and showed that

the farm labor force is quite varied. It also identified unemployment as the most serious problem.

More recent incomplete data, assembled about five years ago, confirm the complexity of the California farm labor market and the wide range in amount of employment obtained in the course of the year. The continuing importance of the unemployment problem is also hinted at in the employment data published in 1978. Currently, about three-quarters of the seasonal farm workers live in the county in which they work. Given the high peaks and the low valleys of farm employment at the county level, the question arises how many of these people want and need year-round employment? And how much employment do they get? Without valid answers to these questions it is difficult to assess the true nature of the unemployment problem.

Unemployment is a problem of national importance and the varied demand for agricultural labor certainly contributes to the general problem. It seems clear that the solution to the overall problem cannot be achieved by each of the segments of the national labor force acting independently. However, as our university labor specialists expand their studies of agricultural labor they should be able to make important contributions to a greater understanding of the matter. Since both the federal and state governments participate in collecting employment and unemployment data, it is essential that our research specialists and agency officials work cooperatively to develop ways to secure appropriate data. Without properly diagnosing the problems of the agricultural labor supply and usage, attempts to provide solutions will be hit and miss with low probabilities of success.

We have voiced in recent months grave concern about the future of our resources in California, and have stressed that the ability of California agriculture to sustain its present diversity and economic strength may well depend on decisions concerning land, water, and energy.

Prudence dictates that we pay equal heed to our most vital resource — people.