

Farm Population of California

California agriculture heavily relies on casual part-time and contract labor to get its work done

Varden Fuller

The following article is the second in a series of reports on a study of the farm population of California.

Agriculture in California is represented by no certain and easily identified segment of the state's population.

Farm population—a term commonly used to indicate the segment of the population concerned with agriculture—has little precision in California, since many people living on farms are not engaged in agriculture and many more who are engaged in agriculture do not live on farms. Nor is the number in agricultural occupations an adequate measure of the people concerned with agriculture, for it fails to include thousands of people who do some farm work but do not make agriculture their occupation.

In the census of April 1950, a total of 294,543 persons—7% of the state's civilian labor force of men and women 14 years old and over—reported having agricultural occupations. Of these—as shown in the table below—less than half actually lived on farms. Off-farm residence was particularly characteristic of farm laborers—70%—but was also widespread among operators—28%.

| Type of worker | Place of Residence | | | Total |
|-----------------------|--------------------|----------------|--------|---------|
| | Rural farm | Rural non-farm | Urban | |
| Farm operators | 80,723 | 10,889 | 20,220 | 111,842 |
| Unpaid family workers | 9,615 | 1,209 | 1,445 | 12,269 |
| Hired laborers | 58,396 | 60,899 | 51,137 | 170,432 |
| Total | 148,734 | 73,007 | 72,802 | 294,543 |

In the same census, the total number of people who reported being employed at that time on farms exceeded—by approximately 55,000—the number of people having agricultural occupations. This suggests that many people, who did not regard themselves as being occupied in agriculture, nevertheless did some farm work. If so wide a difference is found in April—a very slack month in farm work—it would surely be much wider at the seasonal peak in September or October, when the number of temporary farm workers—most of whom would not consider agriculture their regular occupation—is vastly increased.

Unfortunately, there are no available systematic data to determine how many

people are employed in California agriculture at different times of the year or whether the state's agricultural employment is increasing or declining. Although the State Department of Employment prepares estimates of the number of workers on farms, these are a by-product of its farm placement operations and are not offered by it as statistically adequate data on employment.

Three Categories

However, from what information is available, the labor force of California agriculture—as of 1950—can be roughly estimated and divided into three categories, as shown in the following table:

| Type of worker | Category A* | Category B** | Category C*** | Total |
|-----------------------|-------------|--------------|---------------|-------|
| In 1,000s | | | | |
| Farm operators | 80 | 19 | 38 | 137 |
| Unpaid family workers | 7 | 15 | 30 | 52 |
| Hired laborers | 75 | 95 | 180 | 350 |
| Total | 162 | 129 | 248 | 539 |

* Regular, year round.
 ** Regularly occupied in agriculture but intermittently employed.
 *** Casual and incidental workers.

Category *A* represents the stable core of agriculture. It includes commercial farmers whose principal business is farming, as well as family workers and hired laborers who are employed the year round.

Category *B* includes commercial farmers who also work extensively off their farms or have other types of businesses. It also includes family workers and hired laborers who, although they do not work regularly, have a continuing attachment to agriculture. The hired laborers in this category work at a series of seasonal employments, from which they regularly derive a major portion of their incomes.

Category *C* includes those people who perform some agricultural work but not enough—in amount or regularity—to be classified as having agricultural occupations. The operators are on residential and part-time units, and although some of them apparently report to the census that they are occupied in agriculture, other evidence indicates their farming to

be a secondary activity. The unpaid family workers in this category are mainly students who do chores, odd jobs, and other incidental work, principally on commercial farms whose operators would fall in category *A* or *B*.

The hired laborers in category *C* form a highly elastic group that is difficult to estimate. It includes Mexican wetbacks, contracted Mexican laborers, out-of-state migrants, day-haul workers from the towns and cities, and thousands of students, housewives, and miscellaneous persons who participate incidentally and irregularly in the fruit and vegetable harvests. The rough estimate of 180,000 is believed to be a minimum figure. One reason for this is that the number of wetbacks is extremely variable. Also, the number of town and city dwellers working in the fruit and vegetable harvests increases or decreases, depending on the level of nonagricultural employment. The contracted Mexican laborers are the only segment of this group whose numbers are definitely known—7,800 in October 1950, and approximately 40,000 at peak seasons in more recent years.

Thus, there is no certain and easily identified population that may be said to represent agriculture in California. Interdependence is extensive, and the

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POPULATION

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terms and concepts commonly used—whether in reference to farmers, farm laborers, or farm people—seldom have precise meanings. Therefore, the question of who should be counted as farm people or as being in agriculture depends on the definitions that are used.

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The third and last article in this series of reports will be published in the January 1955 issue of California Agriculture.

EWES

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early part of the winter since it appears that these added nutrients will keep the lambs in good enough condition to enable them to slide across the lean-feed periods without losing their lives. The cost of such feeding is returned in increased wool production, body weight, and number of sheep saved.

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