

Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau Ask Laura Column June 2018 (printed July 2018)
Column Author: Laura Tourte, Farm Management Advisor

Q: I hear so much about agricultural labor. Could you please help me understand some of the issues?

A: Labor issues are multifaceted and complex. The agricultural labor situation along the Central Coast and elsewhere in California is, to quote one agricultural leader, “beyond critical”. Here are some of the reasons why*.

- The fresh market crops that dominate agricultural production along the Central Coast are labor intensive.
- Weeding, pruning and training, irrigation and harvest are examples of practices that are especially labor intensive.
- Labor represents between almost 30 and 60 percent of total production and harvest costs, depending upon the crop and crop cycle. It may be even higher for some crops grown elsewhere in California.
- Labor costs are rising, in part because of changing regulations associated with minimum wage, overtime, health care and paid sick leave, but also because of a shortage of workers.
- Immigration constraints and tightened border enforcement have reduced the number of agricultural workers from Mexico—the primary source of labor—that are seeking work in the area and state. The expanding agricultural industry in Mexico has also reduced the number of workers seeking employment here.
- The agricultural labor force is aging and more settled, and have families and other connections to local communities. Because of this, experienced workers do not migrate with the crop production and harvest cycles as often as in the past.
- Most harvest and other labor intensive practices for fresh market crops have not yet been highly mechanized or automated because of important “sensory attributes”—particularly sight and touch—that humans bring to agricultural work. Public and private research efforts are underway to mechanize or automate some of these practices. Mechanical aids are also being used if available, or being developed, with the goal of improving labor efficiency.
- Affordable housing for farm workers is often lacking or constrained. Efforts to address housing issues are in discussion and in progress in the area.
- Some of the area’s farmers now supplement their labor forces with foreign guest workers using the federal H-2A program. The program has expanded rapidly in California in recent years increasing from roughly 3,000 certified farm jobs in fiscal year 2012 to 15,000 in fiscal year 2017. However, the program’s recruitment process, requirements and associated costs limit it as a viable option for some growers.

Please feel free to contact our office if you would like more information.

* The source of information in this column comes from *The Race in the Fields: Imports, Machines and Migrants* (Philip Martin), California Agriculture, December 2017, <http://calag.ucanr.edu>, as well as other articles in California Agriculture. Cost information is from various cost and return studies, which can be found at <https://coststudies.ucdavis.edu>.