

# Seasonal Farmworker Demographics

Fritz Roka

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Seasonal field labor is particularly important to both vegetable and citrus growers who depend on these workers to transplant, stake, tie, prune and finally harvest the season's crop. A grower in southwest Florida spends between \$11,000 and \$12,000 to produce, harvest, pack and market an acre of mature green tomatoes. Between \$3,000 and \$4,000, or over 24 percent, of these costs are payments directly to seasonal field workers. Seasonal workers in citrus primarily pick fruit and have reported earning between 75 and 82 cents per harvested box. During 1995/96, over 54 million boxes of citrus were harvested in southwest Florida, providing earnings to seasonal farmworkers in excess of \$44 million. An understanding of the basic demographic characteristics of this workforce is important both to the future success of agricultural growers and to public officials who are concerned about the status of seasonal farmworkers. In this article, we outline some important demographic questions that focus on maintaining an adequate supply of seasonal farmworkers for the citrus and fresh vegetable industries. In addition, some of the available information is presented and the objectives of an upcoming labor survey for southwest Florida are discussed.

Demographic questions can be grouped into two broad categories: 1) farmworker counts, and 2) seasonal farmworker profiles. Farmworkers need to be counted both from the perspective of total available workers and from the stand point of total man-hours required by agricultural employers. The balance, or imbalance, between the number of farmworkers available and the number of farmworkers required will indicate expected changes in prevailing farmworker wages. Developing farmworker profiles may provide some clues as to the availability of future farmworker.

The availability of farmworkers in southwest Florida is critical from December to March when the citrus harvest is in full swing and vegetable growers are occupied with a full slate of growing and harvest activities. The National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) has found that migrant farmworkers comprise 67 percent of total farm work force in Florida. The high percentage of migrant farmworkers make it difficult to conduct an accurate census of the farmworker population. Indirect methods have been developed to estimate the farmworker population. In 1996 the Shimberg Center for Affordable Housing developed a methodology to estimate migrant farmworkers by using labor expenditure data from the Census of Agriculture and data from the National Agricultural Workers Survey. Their method produced a migrant worker estimate of almost 26,000 in southwest Florida. Using the 67 percent statistic developed by the NAWS, over 38,000 seasonal farmworkers are estimated to be in southwest

Florida. Another estimate of migrant and seasonal farmworkers is available from the Florida Department of Labor (FDOL) who maintains crew leader registration files. Approximately 1,400 crew leaders registered at FDOL area offices in southwest Florida during 1996. Crew leaders indicated on their registration forms that they handled an average of 28 workers per crew, translating to slightly more than 39,000 seasonal farmworkers in southwest Florida. It is important to note that crew leaders do not necessarily register where they or their workers live. Further, crew leaders register during their birth month, so the list is being updated continually and at any one time the list of crew leaders may not accurately reflect the number of active crews working in a given region. Despite the shortcomings with using information from the FDOL crew leader registration forms, it is interesting to note the similar estimate of overall farmworkers between the Shimberg approach and FDOL records.

A third method of estimating farmworkers will be used in an upcoming labor survey for southwest Florida. Cooperating with the FDOL Prevailing Wage and Rate Survey of Citrus and Vegetables, the University of Florida - IFAS will be interviewing a sample of agricultural employers and their farmworkers. These interviews will focus on a particular reference week (probably late January or early February) and ask questions about the total number of people employed, the type of work performed, the total number of hours employed and the total output of work by task accomplished during the reference week. Responses from individual interviews will be blended to develop average measures of worker productivity. With estimates of total output during the reference week and worker productivity measures, an estimate of farmworkers on hand during the reference week will be developed.

A count of available farmworkers is balanced against an estimate of farm labor requirements. An estimate of labor requirements is based on worker productivity and the overall acreage of the crops being grown and harvested. Economists in the Food and Resource Economics Department at the University of Florida - Gainesville and officials from the Florida Department of Labor (FDOL) have been tracking the productivity of citrus harvesters since 1989. Their surveys indicate that a typical harvester can pick nine field boxes (90 pounds per box) per hour. Assuming an average harvest of 450 boxes per acre, 3,500 acres per week, and harvesters working 40 hours per week, a minimum of 4,375 full-time workers would be required for harvesting citrus in southwest Florida alone. Unfortunately, productivity numbers have not been developed for all the vegetable crops grown in southwest Florida. In addition to harvesting efficiencies, productivity values need to be estimated for the other activities required by vegetable growers such as transplanting, staking, tying and pruning. When those worker productivity values are determined, a labor demand estimate could be calculated for vegetables in a manner similar to what was calculated for citrus.

A profile of a seasonal farmworker in Florida may provide indicators that would be helpful in anticipating the future overall availability of farmworkers. During the upcoming southwest Florida survey, two points of information will be asked of farmworkers: 1) residency and tenure status, and 2) farm work

experience. A high percentage of Florida farmworkers migrate out of an agricultural area when the harvest period ends. The residency and tenure status of farmworkers not only documents the proportion of the overall population that moves, but also the timing of when workers are expected to enter an area and when they are expected to leave. More importantly, the location where a farmworker lists as his or her permanent residence provides a clue as to their likelihood of being available for the next production season. While farmworkers may migrate out of Florida in late spring and early summer, if they list a Florida location as their permanent residence, the more likely one could expect their return.

Documenting years of farmwork experience could also provide some indication about future availability of farmworkers, especially if such a statistic could be monitored over time. An increasing value for years of experience would indicate a greater percentage of workers returning in subsequent seasons. Conversely, a declining value for experience would indicate a replacement of more experienced workers with newer ones and therefore raise a doubt as to whether a constant pool of workers can be continually attracted to farming operations. As an additional benefit, knowing the average years of experience could indicate the need or lack of need for various farm training programs.

A third set of questions in the Southwest Florida Farmworker Survey will focus on household characteristics of seasonal farmworkers. These questions will ask about marital status and whether the worker is living in Florida as a single person or with a family unit. If the farmworker lives with a family, than follow up questions will ask about the number and ages of children. The importance of this information is primarily for public service officials who are concerned about housing, education, health and public safety issues. Concern from both growers and public officials has been pointed at the condition and availability of farmworker housing. Knowing the basic characteristics of a farmworker household can aid in the planning for specific housing structures. The housing needs of single men would be different from housing need of farmworkers with school age children.

Growers and public officials have lacked basic information about the seasonal farmworker population. Considerable effort has gone into the counting and characterization of farmworkers. The fact that a significant proportion of farmworkers migrate geographically within and across seasons, makes any effort to document farmworker demographics challenging. The results from the Southwest Florida Farmworker Survey will be analyzed and compared to other farmworker survey efforts. If results turn out similar to what has been estimated before, the upcoming survey effort will add important consensus to the overall understanding of the seasonal farmworker population.