

The Truth About Agriculture and Farmworkers

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Robert Ruiz, farmworker at Kornegay Family Farms in Princeton, NC has picked up a bushel of sweet potatoes and is on the way to the truck. Robert is a guest worker on the farm and has a temporary visa through the H-2A program. This scene is common on many farms throughout Johnston County and Eastern North Carolina. NC is the number one state for production of sweet potatoes and Johnston County is a top production county. (Photo by: Grayson Morgan Photography)

As a public employee working for an educational organization that supports farms and farmers of all different sizes, misinformation about farms and agriculture can be really concerning. These days, one needs a great deal of discernment to determine the truth, and you certainly will not always discover that truth by searching the Internet or social media. Recent statements have been presented to news media that paint a distorted picture of the relationship between farmers and farmworkers. This impression hurts farmers, farmworkers, and spreads disinformation about the agricultural industry. N.C. Cooperative Extension is an organization based upon science and facts, and we serve all segments of the agricultural industry. Further, we do not discriminate against those that we serve or may serve for any reason. Therefore, I am sharing this information to provide a more accurate picture of what I see on farms in Johnston County.

I personally know many farmers and many farmworkers, and from what I have experienced during my life, they are the salt of the earth. I live on a rural road and when someone drives by, I always look to see who it may be. I often see farm workers pass by while I am working in my yard. They may be driving a pickup truck, farm tractor, or riding in a bus. Now for those of you that did not grow up in rural North Carolina, when you throw up your hand you are “speaking” to the person. I always speak to them by waving, and they wave back. Some of these folks I know by name and some I do not, but they all are my neighbors. It is my perception that they enjoy what they are doing from the smiles that I see on their faces. I enjoy my job, and on the best days, I smile more often. Then there are days that I smile less. I see this with farmworkers as well.

Farms in North Carolina employ people in different positions to accomplish all of the jobs on the farm. There are many different scenarios that fit farms of many different types and sizes. Some farms employ full-time

permanent workers that work 12 months on a continuous basis. Many of these employees are career employees with a farm operation, and I believe they see their career as an extension of who they are. They often fulfill multiple roles of equipment operation, basic farm duties, machinery repairs, truck driving, secretarial or administrative work, or even as a foreman for the seasonal workers. Depending on the size and scope of the farm there could be 0 to 20, or even more, full-time workers. Farmers that produce mostly grain, cotton, or peanuts may produce crops on many acres with very few workers due to mechanization. However, specialty crop farms require a much larger labor force. The other major category of farm workers in North Carolina is seasonal workers which farm operations employ through several different mechanisms.

Seasonal farm workers can be further divided into three categories. The first is that the farmer may know local people that live in the community and need seasonal work. Often, in these cases, there is a tradition established that is mutually beneficial, and the farmer and the workers know they can depend upon each other. The second option is that the farmer may simply contract with a Farm Labor Contractor (commonly referred to as a crew leader) to provide workers as needed. Some of these labor crews would be called “migrant farmworkers” as they travel along the east coast to where work is available at a given time. Other crew leaders live in this area and work with local farmers throughout the growing and harvest season. The third, and perhaps primary way, that local farmers acquire seasonal labor is through the H-2A program. H-2A is a government designation for Temporary Agricultural Workers, also called guest workers. In this case, farmers typically contract with a third party to recruit the workers, arrange transportation, and apply for all the necessary visas and documents.

Guest workers (H-2A), generally come to farms in our county for the season with the understanding that they will be present until all the harvesting is done. The grower pays the cost for the worker to come to North Carolina and return to their home. The grower also provides housing and transportation while they are present on the farm. Sometimes these workers may leave our county and go to the mountains at the end of the season to harvest apples or perhaps work in Christmas trees but others simply return home. The wages for these workers are established each year by the federal government through what is called the “adverse effect wage rate” which was \$12.67 in North Carolina during 2020. On most farms, the same workers return year after year, and I have known seasonal workers that have worked on the same farm for 20 years or more. Often, when a worker decides to no longer return or the farmer needs to add more workers, the workers help recruit others at home to join their group.

Typical Summer Farm Worker flow in Johnston County

February-April:

A few workers begin to arrive, but not a full workforce. Farmers arrange enough workers to help with production of tobacco plants, bedding of sweet potatoes, and other farm work.

April – June:

Farm workers begin transplanting tobacco and perhaps other crops and transition to cutting sweet potato plants and transplanting sweet potatoes. On farms with fresh vegetable or fruit crops, workers are also involved with harvesting crops. Weed control in some crops by hand weeding or hoeing is also done during this time period.

June – July:

Weed control and harvest of fresh market vegetables may continue and workers begin topping tobacco.

July – September:

Most of the farm labor force is involved in harvesting flue-cured tobacco.

September – November:

Most of the farm labor is harvesting sweet potatoes. Workers either return home or move elsewhere to harvest crops. Most of the temporary visas do not extend beyond 10 months.

When you consider the wage rate, housing, transportation, and fees, labor is expensive on farms and represents a significant portion of total production cost. Farmers do everything possible to make labor as efficient and easy as possible to minimize costs and keep their workers in good health. In 2020, farmers were especially concerned about the health of their workers due to COVID-19. If a farm workforce was sidelined for 2-3 weeks, it could be disastrous for a farm operation. For some crops, harvest can be delayed, but for a fresh market crop the result would be major yield losses. Therefore, farmers protect their workers. They avoid the hottest periods of the day during a heat wave, they work during the cooler periods of the day, provide safety equipment, and follow guidelines. Housing and transportation must meet proper standards and be inspected. When someone is sick, farmers get them to the doctor or the hospital as needed. During 2020, farmers provided face coverings for workers, hand sanitizer, and went the extra mile to keep workers protected from COVID.

If you work in an environment with others, you naturally develop close relationships. You care about each other's well-being and family members. It is this same way on a farm. Farmers and farmworkers are a team. They work together toward the same goal, and they depend on each other. They become like a family.

I have tremendous respect and appreciation for all of the people involved in the agricultural industry. They work hard to make a living and they are dedicated to put food on the table. Do they make money? Well, I sure hope so, because if they do not they cannot keep us fed. 15 years ago I met a Latino farm worker who was actually a college professor in his native country. He was an educated man. However, he could make more money working on a farm in North Carolina than as a professor in his home country. Seasonal workers come to our country to earn a living. They come voluntarily year after year.

Most of us, myself included, go to the grocery store and depend on food to be there. To be honest, I was never concerned that we would have enough food through the pandemic because of the tradition of hard work and dedication of the ag sector. This includes small farms, big farms, food processing, trucking, distribution, and retail. This is part of what it means to live in the greatest country in the world. The hard work and ingenuity of the American farmer has made it possible for many of us to pursue other careers rather than toiling daily to produce the necessary food and fiber for our families.

The truth is that most of the general public do not have a robust understanding of agriculture or farming. There are many definitions of a farm and these days everyone wants to live on the farm, visit the farm, or be from a farm. Ultimately, this is only true for a small portion of the population. According to Miriam Webster one definition of, a farm (n) is, "a plot of land devoted to agricultural purposes." At the same time a farmer is "a person who cultivates land or crops or raises animals." These definitions of farm and farmer are quite broad. To me, a farmer is a person who engages in these activities for a substantial portion of their income or well-being. In other words, if I work in the garden 2 hours per week that does not necessarily make me a farmer.

According to USDA, "In 2019, 22.2 million full and part-time jobs were related to the agricultural and food sectors—10.9 percent of total U.S. employment. Direct on-farm employment accounted for about 2.6 million of these jobs, or 1.3 percent of U.S. employment. Employment in agriculture and food-related industries supported another 19.6 million jobs. Of this, food service, eating, and drinking places accounted for the largest share—13.0 million jobs—and food/beverage stores supported 3.2 million jobs. The remaining agriculture-related industries together added another 3.4 million jobs." So, when you boil it down, 1.3 percent of the population is doing the farm work. 1.3% of the population is working to feed us and this is a profession on which we all depend.