

Immigration and the Changing Face of Ventura County

by

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Immigrant farm workers who once shuttled in and out of the United States are settling in the areas in which they work, changing the face of their communities. Settlement in Ventura county has been associated in the 1990s with low earnings, encouraging farm workers to find nonfarm jobs, raising questions about how to get replacement workers.

The “face” of rural and agricultural California is changing, as immigrants from Mexico settle in the areas where they work. UC Davis has been conducting *Changing Face* seminars in rural and agricultural areas to examine the impacts of immigrants on the farm-related industries and communities in which they are employed and the prospects for integrating immigrants and their children in these industries and communities. This report summarizes the findings and discussions of the changing face of Ventura county.

Ventura Farm Workers

Ventura county had a population of 753,197 in 2000, including 252,000 Hispanics, making it the twelfth largest county in California; most residents live in the southern half of the county. There are ten incorporated cities in Ventura county, and Hispanics are over 50 percent of the population of five cities

and places: Oxnard, El Rio, Santa Paula, Fillmore and Piru. Hispanics and whites are separated: two-thirds of white residents of Ventura county live in cities that are at least 70 percent white, while one-third of Latinos live in communities that are at least 70 percent Latino. Oxnard, for example, added 28,000 residents in the 1990s, the net effect of losing 11,000 whites and 1,000 Blacks and gaining 30,000 Hispanics.

Ventura county is one of California’s major agricultural counties; its \$1 billion in annual farm sales, dominated by lemons (25,000 acres and sales of \$187 million) and strawberries (7,600 acres and sales of \$187 million), rank it tenth among California counties, and equivalent in farm sales to Utah. There were an average 20,000 employees on county farms in 2000, up from 17,000 in 1990, and they represented about five percent of the county’s employment. Farm employment peaks at 25,000 in April-May, and reaches a trough of 16,000 in January.

EDD obtains employment data from farm employers as well as farm labor contractors, custom harvesters and other employers of farm workers who pay unemployment insurance taxes on their workers’ wages. Table 1 indicates that between 1985 and 2000, employment in Ventura county increased by 37 percent, and farm employment rose at about the same pace. However, there was a marked contrast between farm production employment (employees directly hired by farming operations) and farm services employment (employees hired and brought to farms by contractors and custom harvesters). Average farm production employment

Table 1. Ventura County Agricultural Employment: 1985-2000, Employment Development Department

Ventura County Employment					
Year	1985	1990	1995	2000	1985-2000
Civilian Employment	287,400	349,300	353,600	392,700	37%
Civilian Unemployment	22,600	21,100	28,500	18,700	-17%
Farm Production	9,300	10,700	9,600	11,900	28%
Farm Services	5,100	6,000	7,400	7,700	51%
Total Farm Employment	14,400	16,700	17,000	19,600	36%
Food and Kindred Products	2,200	1,700	1,600	1,300	-41%

rose 28 percent, while average services employment rose 51 percent. Employment in processing food and kindred products fell 41 percent.

Employers report employees by month, and seasonality decreased slightly for directly hired workers between 1993 and 2000, and increased slightly for farm services' workers. Table 1 confirms that in both 1993 and 2000, production employment peaked in April, reflecting the expansion of strawberry acreage. Farm services employment in the spring months fell between 1993 and 2000, from almost 10,000 in 1993 to under 8,000 in 2000.

Most farm workers in Ventura county were born in Mexico, often in Michoacan and Guanajuato, with the newest farm workers often Mixtec-speaking indigenous peoples from Oaxaca, many of whom settled in the Port Hueneme area. Some of the Mixtecs have little education, but others are teachers or hold professional jobs in Oaxaca.

Most Ventura county farm workers live in conventional housing—single family homes, apartments and mobile homes—but housing is expensive—the 40th percentile fair market rent for Ventura county was \$1,000 a month for a two-bedroom apartment in 2002. Thus, many families double up in housing units, leading to overcrowding, especially in Oxnard, and in mobile home parks around Santa Paula and Fillmore. There are several labor camps in the county, including the ex-Coastal Growers camp in Oxnard that has solo males and a Cabrillo Village in Ventura, which is mostly farm worker families. The earnings-housing cost gap for farm workers is among the highest in the state—an income of \$3,400 a month is needed to keep housing that costs \$1,000 a month at 30 percent of income.

Farm Labor Evolution

Growth and change in Ventura county agriculture between 1980 and 2000 have not improved conditions for farm workers. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, most lemon pickers were unionized. When the minimum wage was \$2.65 an hour in 1978, many had piece-rate earnings of \$5 to \$7 an hour and worked 800 to 1,200 hours a year. In 2002, with a state minimum wage of \$6.75, many

Table 2. Agricultural Employment by Month: Ventura County, 1993, 2000

	1993 production	1993 service	2000 production	2000 service
January	8,100	6,100	10,600	5,300
February	10,500	8,100	13,300	5,400
March	13,000	8,800	15,800	6,700
April	15,700	9,500	17,500	7,600
May	15,100	9,200	17,000	7,800
June	13,200	9,000	13,700	7,400
July	10,000	7,800	9,300	8,700
August	7,100	7,400	8,400	8,700
September	7,500	7,600	8,500	8,200
October	9,100	7,700	10,300	8,300
November	6,900	5,900	9,600	9,500
December	6,800	6,100	8,900	9,200
Max	15,700	9,500	17,500	9,500
Min	6,800	5,900	8,400	5,300
Ratio	2.3	1.6	2.1	1.8

Source: Employment Development Department

workers earn \$7 to \$10 an hour, and hours of work have fallen, reducing annual earnings.

The strong nonfarm labor market of 1998-2000 offered farm workers with transferable skills such as equipment operator nonfarm job options, which improved their wages and put upward pressure on the hours and earnings of remaining farm workers.

For many years, Ventura county agriculture included a wide range of cooperatives providing services to mid-sized lemon and orange growers. The co-op principle was extended to labor management, which meant that professional managers were often hired to organize workers for the lemon harvest. The Ventura county citrus industry was a pioneer in providing housing and other services to farm workers and, in many cases, their families. However, between 1942 and 1964, the packing houses that controlled citrus harvesting switched to Bracero workers, and Ventura county citrus became dependent on Mexican guest workers who were housed in barracks style camps. The mid-1960s were thus a "time of transition" for labor in Ventura county, as lemon growers responded to the end of the Bracero program by reducing quality standards

for picking, introducing a piece rate wage system that aimed to standardize worker earnings even as grove conditions changed, and increasing worker productivity with new clippers, lighter synthetic bags, aluminum ladders and larger bins. Worker benefits were introduced or increased, as employers offered health and pension benefits and UI benefits to stabilize the work force or to keep the same workers returning year-after-year.

The largest of the labor co-ops was the Coastal Growers Association (CGA), founded in 1961. According to Mines and Anzaldua, CGA and other harvesting co-ops were established to insulate packing houses from employer responsibilities. In 1980, Ventura county had 25,000 acres of lemons and 17,000 acres of oranges, as well as 17 citrus packing houses.

CGA assumed for its grower-members all responsibility for harvesting their lemons, including enforcing industry-wide quality standards, and became large enough to achieve economies of scale in recruiting, housing and deploying lemon harvesters. After the Bracero program ended, CGA developed “modern personnel practices” to recruit, reward and encourage the return of the best pickers. The result was a win-win situation: CGA pickers saw their average piece rate earnings rise from \$1.77 an hour in 1965 to \$5.63 an hour in 1978, and average annual earnings rise from \$267 (151 hours) in 1965 to \$3,430 in 1978 (609 hours). The number of pickers employed at CGA (W-2 statements issued) fell from 8,517 in 1965 to 1,292 in 1978, as average productivity rose sharply—from 3.4 boxes an hour in 1965, to 8.4 boxes an hour in 1978; CGA in 1966 expanded from serving three packinghouses to seven.

The UFW organized the workers employed at most of the labor co-ops in the spring of 1978. The background for the union drive was a bumper crop of lemons in 1976-77, which reduced prices and led growers not to raise piece rates in 1978. On March 31, 1978, after a dispute over the height of the trees and thus the piece rate in one grove, CGA workers voted 897-42 to have the UFW represent them. CGA negotiated a three-year agreement that raised piece rates by 12+5+5 percent, and changed to the UFW’s RFK health care plan. By the end of 1978, 70 of the peak 100 thirty-man picking crews in Ventura county were working under UFW contracts.

Several grower-members withdrew from CGA after unionization, and CGA saw the number of boxes of lemons picked fall from eight million

to five million between the mid-1970s and 1980, giving CGA less opportunity to spread its fixed costs. CGA was eventually dissolved, and lemons were picked by farm labor contractors/custom harvesters. FLCs paid the pickers the same or more per box, but had lower workers’ compensation costs and overhead. FLCs also decentralized the rate sheet—they did not necessarily use the county standard and shifted from transporting workers from co-op labor camps in co-op buses to telling workers to arrange their own transportation in car pools or vans from housing in the community. This remains the major way that lemons are picked today.

In 2000-01, the labor supply was tightening with tighter border controls, pushing up piece rates, but there has not been (1) an effort to organize labor demand and supply to minimize the number of pickers, or (2) a move to restore benefits. Unless there is a labor shortage, it seems unlikely that the industry will once again organize itself to use the fewest workers for the longest periods, and to identify and retain the best workers. Thus, a guest worker program’s impact in Ventura county depends on the details of the program—will a guest worker program legalize the status quo, or bring about efficiency-increasing labor changes?

Guest Workers

By the late 1990s, there were many calls in the U.S. and Mexico for a new approach to Mexico-U.S. migration. With an average of one migrant a day dying in the desert, a U.S. unemployment rate under four percent, and farm and nonfarm employers asking for a new guest worker program, Mexican President Fox and U.S. President Bush agreed to explore new ways of managing Mexico-U.S. migration in February 2001. During the summer of 2001, Mexico pushed for a five-pronged agreement that included earned legalization, a new guest worker program and more immigration visas for Mexico.

Many local farm leaders also argue that almost anything would be better than the status quo in farm labor. The UFW and most worker advocates say there is no need for guest workers, that unemployment is high and workers are employed too few hours each week currently. The worker advocates argue that growers want unauthorized workers, or guest workers, because such workers are more dependent on the employer, and less likely to complain.

Conclusions

Ventura county is an example of poverty amid prosperity. When farm sales were half their current level two decades ago, and citrus dominated farm sales, average hourly earnings were 2-3 times the minimum wage, and farm workers earned enough to support families in Mexico or in Ventura county. Today, farm sales have doubled, but most workers earn the minimum wage or up to 1.5 times the minimum wage. Living on such wages has become much harder because housing costs have risen.

Avoiding poverty amid prosperity for current farm workers and their children will require the creation of farm and nonfarm jobs that offer higher wages and more hours of work. Some of these jobs may be created in the nursery industry and other farm-related businesses that offer almost year-round employment. However, most current farm workers and their children will need more education, as well as English, to obtain more hours of work at higher wages.

This leaves the question of what to do about seasonal farm workers. The status quo, which includes 50-60 percent unauthorized workers—makes it very hard for workers to help themselves. The two extremes of the policy discussion are to legalize currently unauthorized workers, thus reducing their “hard and scared” fears, or to convert them as well as future farm workers into guest workers who would be required to leave the U.S., e.g. one month a year. The in-between solution is earned legalization—a temporary legal status that can be converted to immigrant status after 3-4 years in which the worker does 90-120 days of farm work a year.

Each of these federal policy choices has different consequences for farm employers, workers and local communities. Legalization is likely to help workers to leave farm work and unify their families, inducing employers to request more workers from abroad, and perhaps speeding up family unification, with consequences for local communities. The guest worker option may wind up legalizing the status quo, especially if farmers do not have to raise wages or to provide housing to guest workers. Earned legalization is likely to have the same effects as legalization, with a delay.

However, the important point for poverty amid prosperity is what happens after the current farm work force is affected by legalization, guest workers

or earned legalization. In each case, current workers are likely to get out of farm work within 5-10 years, as they do now. Policy decisions on how replacement workers arrive are likely to determine whether agriculture becomes an island within counties, with farmers and their guest workers isolated from the rest of the county's economy and labor market, or whether farm and nonfarm labor markets converge, with workers shifting between farm and nonfarm jobs.

References and Sources

The papers presented at the *Changing Face* seminars are posted at: <http://migration.ucdavis.edu/rmn/changingface.html>. The next seminar is scheduled for April-May 2003 in Asilomar, California. It will feature the detailed analyses of 2000 census data for rural and agricultural areas, and a site visit to the vegetable and strawberry production areas of the Salinas Valley.

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