

Ask the ARE Faculty

WHAT WILL BE THE IMPACT OF A NEW GUEST-WORKER PROGRAM IN CALIFORNIA?

On July 23, 1998, the US Senate approved S2337, the Agricultural Job Opportunity Benefits and Security Act of 1998 (AgJOBS) on a 68-31 vote as an amendment to the \$33 billion Commerce-Justice-State Department appropriations bill. The Clinton administration expressed “strong opposition” to AgJOBS, and AgJOBS faces an uncertain future in the House.

The AgJOBS program would provide for an “alternative program for the admission of H-2A workers.” The H-2A program admitted about 15,000 legal nonimmigrants to be employed in farm jobs in FY97, including several hundred shepherders in California. AgJOBS is based on a new type of employment service, a “registry” that includes the names of legally authorized workers willing to do farm work. Farmers would notify the registry if they needed workers. If the registry had insufficient US workers, farmers would receive permission to have admitted and then employ H-2A workers. Under AgJOBS, US and H-2A workers would not have to be provided with free housing, as under the current H-2A program.

The AgJOBS H-2A program is very employer-friendly, and could be expected to dramatically increase the number of workers with H-2A visas employed in California agriculture. Currently, some 800,000 to 900,000 individuals work for wages on California farms sometime during a typical year; peak employment is about 400,000 in September. An estimated 40% of these farm workers are not authorized to work in the US.

If legal workers were available roughly at the same cost as currently unauthorized workers, as might be the case under the AgJOBS H-2A program, there may in 1999 be several hundred thousand AgJOBS H-2A workers in California, including currently illegal workers who receive H-2A visas.

Phil Martin, ARE Professor

WHERE DO YOU SEE BEST OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH IN CALIFORNIA'S ORGANIC PRODUCTION?

The greatest opportunities for growth in organic agriculture are probably in meat and poultry. The labeling of meat and poultry comes under the jurisdiction of the Federal Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), which is part of USDA. They are in the position of approving requests for the labeling of meat and poultry sold in the United States. To date, FSIS has denied all requests to use the label organic or certified organic on meat and poultry, essentially locking livestock producers out of the burgeoning organic market. The rationale has been that until the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 (OFPA) is implemented, there are no national standards for organic production and, in particular, no definition of organic livestock from which to make a ruling. Therefore, when the rules are established from OFPA, the opportunities thus far unavailable to livestock producers will open up. Obviously, this will also create a demand for organic feed.

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