

To Migrate? Or Not to Migrate?

Mobility of Migrant Farmworkers in US Agriculture, Its Causes, and Its Effects



"Agriculture is different"

Agriculture is unlike most other key sectors of the North American economy in that its comparative advantage has rested on having access to abundant low-skilled labor instead of on the accumulation of human capital (education and skills).



Mexico: The Middle Man

Mexico is the major supplier of hired labor to US farms, and Guatemala has become a supplier of farm labor to Mexico, thus, Mexico is in the transitional phase of being both a farm labor exporter and importer.

Both farm labor supply and demand in Mexico are key to maintaining an abundant supply of low-wage labor to US farms.



A shift in the tide



After four decades that brought 12 million current immigrants—most of whom came illegally—the net migration flow from Mexico to the United States, the largest wave of immigration in history from a single country to the United States has come to a standstill, and may have reversed.

Moving off the farm

On the supply side, workforces are becoming less agricultural throughout the region.

The share of the total workforce employed in agriculture is high in Mexico and Central America relative to the United States, but it is falling fast.

As young people in these countries attain higher levels of education, they increasingly leave farm jobs for jobs in the service sector.



Gaining Importance

The shrinking of the domestic farm workforce in Mexico is also a result of a shift away from owner-operated small farms, subsistence farming, and unpaid family workers, meaning that the share of hired (rather than family) farm labor has gained importance in Mexican agricultural production.





Homebodies: Incentives to Stay

Increased productivity means that Mexican farm workers have a higher agricultural reservation wage, and many opt to stay at home rather than emigrate to work in an agriculture sector abroad.

Especially if working abroad comes with risks.

Better Wages

- Adjusted for inflation, the average daily wage in the Mexican agricultural sector rose nearly 14 percent from 2000 to 2007.
- Meanwhile, the real hourly wages rose just by over 3% for newly arrived, foreign-born farm workers in the United States over approximately the same period (though the average number of farm days worked increased from 76 to 90, or by more than 18%).



A critical 1% of the puzzle



Hired farmworkers make up less than 1 percent of all U.S. wage and salary workers, but they play an essential role in U.S. agriculture.

And immigrant workers are the backbone of the hired farm labor force in the United States, filling a labor shortage estimated at 800,000 people or more nationwide in the fresh produce sector alone.

Going with the flow

Migrant farmworkers plant and pick most of the fruits and vegetables eaten in the United States.

Seasonal crop farmers, who employ workers only a few weeks of the year, rely on workers who migrate from one job to another within the United States.



The National MEP program has seen close to a 10% decrease in the number of migrant students each year since 2007.

A large, three-dimensional graphic of the text '10%' in a bright red color. The characters are thick and blocky, with a slight shadow cast beneath them, giving them a 3D appearance. The '1' is a simple vertical bar, the '0' is a ring, and the '%' symbol consists of a diagonal slash and a ring.

Not exactly where we were predicted to be



Department of Education figures show for the 2013-2014 school year there were 347,634 migrant students that were eligible.

That's much less than the 800,000 students that were estimated by the National Commission on Migrant Education in 1994.

And the numbers keep falling

The average number of hired farmworkers has steadily declined over the last century, from roughly 3.4 million to just over 1 million.



And falling...

Between 2002 and 2012, the number of new field and crop workers immigrating to the United States fell by roughly 75 percent.

This led to a drop in the number of entry-level workers available for difficult jobs like hoeing, harvesting, and planting.



And falling

USDA's Farm Labor Survey (FLS) finds that from 2002 to 2014, the size of the workforce farmers had to draw from dropped by more than a fifth, causing a major labor shortage on U.S. Farms.



An Aging Workforce

Today's field and crop workers are rapidly aging, signaling even greater potential future challenges when the current generation of workers retires.



And who will help me hoe the fields?

Because finding migrants to pick their crops before they spoil is becoming increasingly difficult, seasonal crop farmers are struggling, especially those working to produce labor-intensive fruits, vegetables, and tree nuts.



“Not I!” say many US-born workers

Even with an imported labor force of more than one million, farms still face up to a 30 percent shortage in labor.

Research findings echo what growers often say anecdotally—that many native-born workers are unwilling or unable to do farm jobs, even with the 9.7 million unemployed US citizens over the age of 16 (3.2 million of whom are long-term unemployed), as estimated by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics July 2014.



Jobs to be filled

The U.S.-born farmworkers who have entered agriculture in recent years are also not likely to have filled the labor-intensive field and crop jobs, but tend to work in the same types of semi-skilled tasks that often attract the most experienced foreign-born workers

Just 12 percent of all the field and crop workers employed in migrant-farming jobs in 2008 to 2012 were born in America.



In 2010, when unemployment remained high, California farmers posted ads for more than 1,160 farm worker positions. Despite that, 233 legal permanent residents or U.S. citizens responded, and few lasted the season.



Why not?



Several factors—both real and perceived—contribute to the reluctance of native-born workers to seek jobs in agriculture, either on farms or in processing facilities.

Such as?

- Low wages compared to those paid for other similarly physical occupations
- Physically taxing & lots of stamina is needed,
- Difficult working conditions,
- Transitory employment opportunities,
- The prospect of extensive travel for undertaking seasonal work
- Stigmatization of farm labor as an 'immigrant job' category



It's not about the money



Such recruitment problems are not inherently a wage issue either: The average wage paid to farm workers was \$11.10 in 2013, well above the federal minimum wage of \$7.25.

Widespread Effects

Had labor shortages not been an issue, production of labor intensive crops could have been higher by about \$3.1 billion a year.



Trickle Down Effect

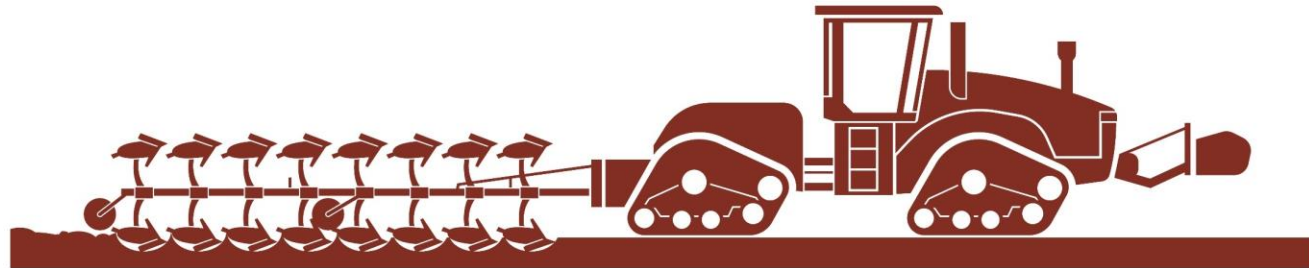
Given that farm revenues often trickle down to other industries in our economy, that \$3.1 billion in additional farm production would have led to almost \$2.8 billion in added spending on non-farm services and tens of thousands of jobs in related industries like trucking, marketing, manufacturing, transportation, and irrigation each year. That spending would have created more than 41,000 additional non-farm jobs in our economy annually.



Man vs Machine: Crops

The ongoing labor troubles faced by farmers also present major question about how sustainable it will be for small farmers to continue growing the most labor-intensive fruit and vegetable crops for the long term.

For many fresh fruits and vegetables mechanized harvesting is not feasible, meaning growers are dependent upon less-skilled and semi-skilled workers to pick the crop by hand.



A Delicate Touch

The situation is most acute for delicate berries and easily bruised produce, which often are not only harvested by hand, but processed that way as well.

For example, the harvesting costs for strawberries, blackberries, and cherries account for about 60% to 66% of total production costs— with labor costs being the primary harvest expense.



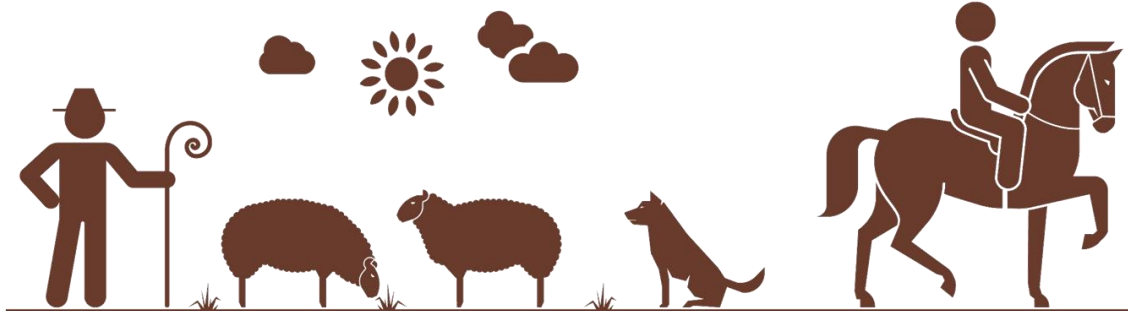
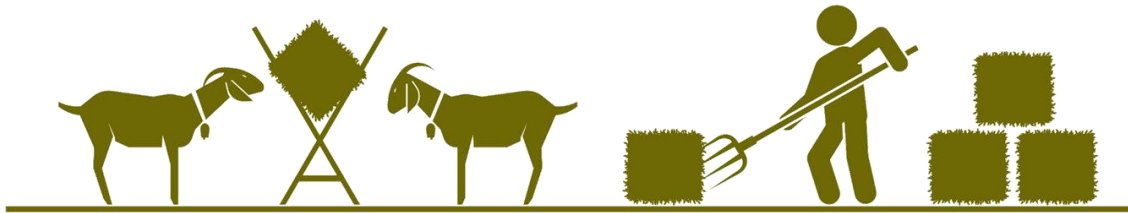
Switching Gears



Anecdotally, many farmers say they have already shifted some of their acreage to mechanically harvested commodities. These crops on average require fewer workers, generate less revenue for the community, and create fewer ancillary jobs.

Between 2002 and 2012, some 300,000 acres of farmland previously used to grow fresh fruit, vegetables, and tree nuts were taken out of production altogether.”

Man vs Machine: Livestock



- Animal care is very labor intensive.
- While large-scale farms may be able to replace labor with machines and automation—an Indiana-based dairy farm with 36,000 cows operates at a ratio of approximately 150 to 170 cows per worker vs. the 8 cows per worker average of smaller farms—such infrastructure is often cost-prohibitive for small- and medium-sized farms.

Competing for Workers & Dollars

One sign of how acute the situation has been in recent years for growers is that farmers have raised the wages of field and crop workers despite a variety of outside pressures that have made it difficult for them to do so.

This has placed a strain on many U.S. farms at a time when they're competing with lower prices due to a 94.6 percent surge in imports (between 1998-2012) of fresh fruits and vegetables (58.1% surge in fresh fruits alone.)



A simple shift

One reason why farmers today struggle to fill field and crop laborer jobs has to do with a simple reality: In recent years, fewer young immigrants have come to the United States and entered into farm work.



Economic & Immigration Slowdown

- In the aftermath of the Great Recession, the number of Mexicans apprehended trying to cross the border has hit historic lows.
- While the Border Patrol apprehended 1.6 million such immigrants in 2000, the figure hit just 229,000 in 2014.
- Almost *all* of the decline in field and crop workers in the United States can be explained by the lack of recent immigrant arrivals



Been around for a while?

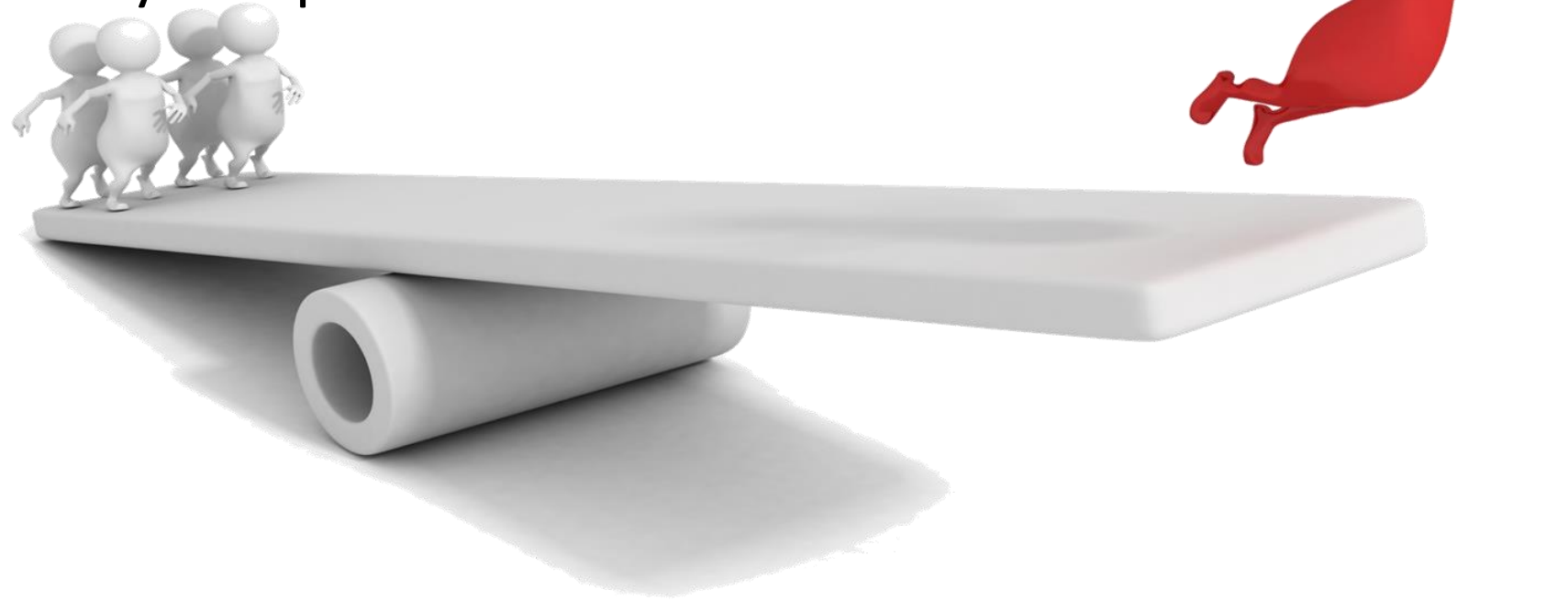
The other notable trend is the increase in the share of field and crop workers who are foreign-born individuals who have lived in the United States for long time periods.

The decline in recent years of immigrant field and crop workers was partially offset by the increase in employment among foreign-born workers who had been in the United States for at least 25 years.



Still Off Balance

- However, for each additional foreign-born field and crop worker who had been in the United States for at least 25 years there were 5.3 fewer workers who recently arrived from a foreign country.
- The decline in immigration was far greater than more experienced workers could effectively compensate for.



Experienced preferred, right?

While the trend towards fewer recent immigrants might seem like a positive development for U.S. farms, particularly if it meant that employers would have access to more experienced and skilled workers, the change has actually translated into significant staffing challenges and shortages, particularly for entry-level positions.



Still available! Entry-level jobs

Inexperienced field and crop workers, a group largely comprised of recent immigrants, tend to work on certain entry-level tasks and are more than twice as likely to work as migrant farmworkers who “follow the crop.”

With fewer new immigrants arriving, these are the positions farmers often have the most trouble filling.



Effects of an Aging Workforce

- Unlike other industries, where older workers may be capable of producing more due to their increased experience, studies have consistently found that farm workers pick and process less as they age, likely due to the physically strenuous nature of the work.
- One study found that the productivity of farm workers overall peaks at around age 35 or 45, and declines steeply afterwards. The aging of field and crop workers also poses the threat that in the coming years, retirement may worsen the labor shortage.



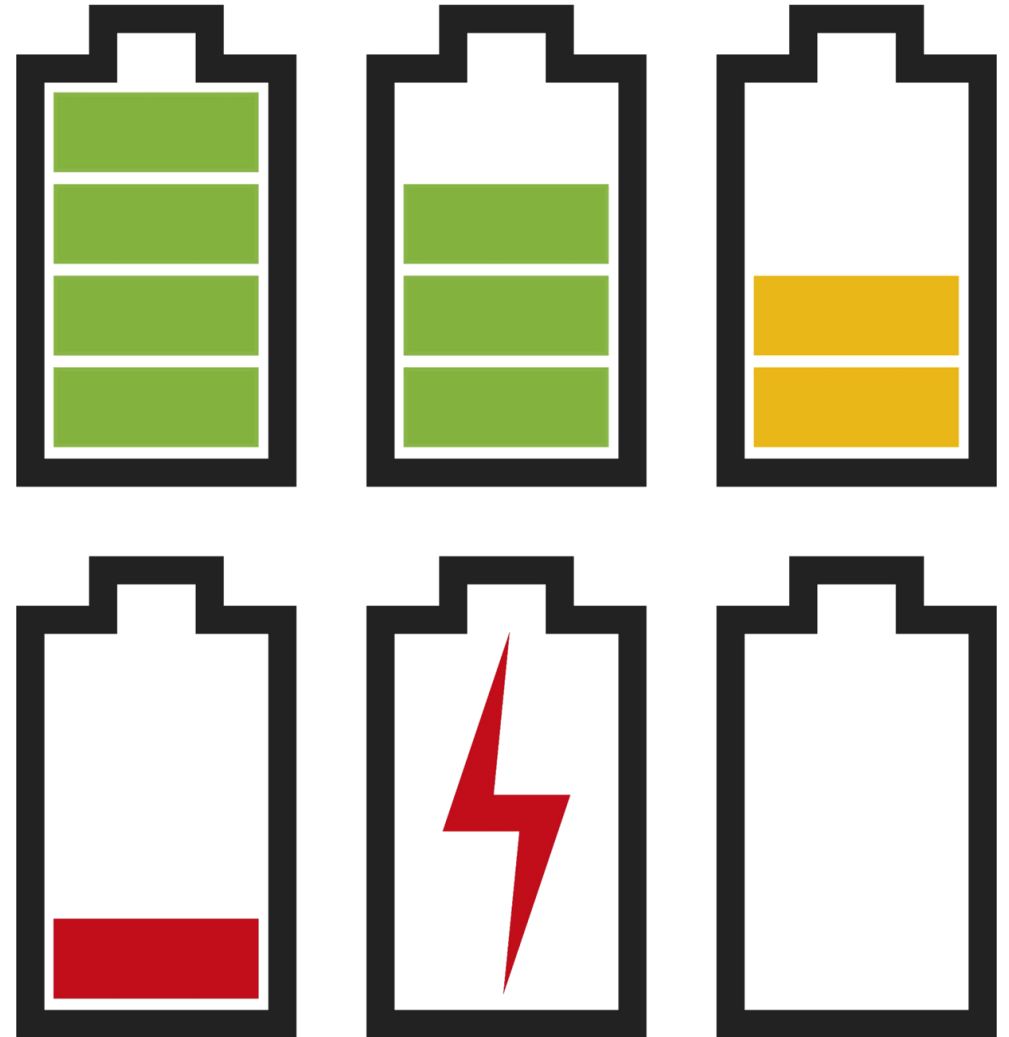
Americans began eating a lot healthier and the market for fruits and vegetables was incredibly strong. All good news for farmers, right?

Not exactly. In America, our production of fresh produce and the demands of consumers are increasingly out-of-sync, as imports have made up an ever growing share of the fresh fruits and vegetables consumed by American families.



Bigger Demand & Smaller Supply will Drain You Dry

- Between the 1998-2000 period and the 2010-2012 one, the amount of fresh produce consumed by Americans grew by 10.5 percent. During that same time frame, the amount of fresh produce being produced by U.S. growers rose by only 1.4 percent.
- For fresh vegetables, the gap was even more significant: While Americans increased their consumption of fresh vegetables by 9.1 percent during that period, farm production of fresh vegetables actually declined—falling 3.5 percent overall for major fresh vegetables.





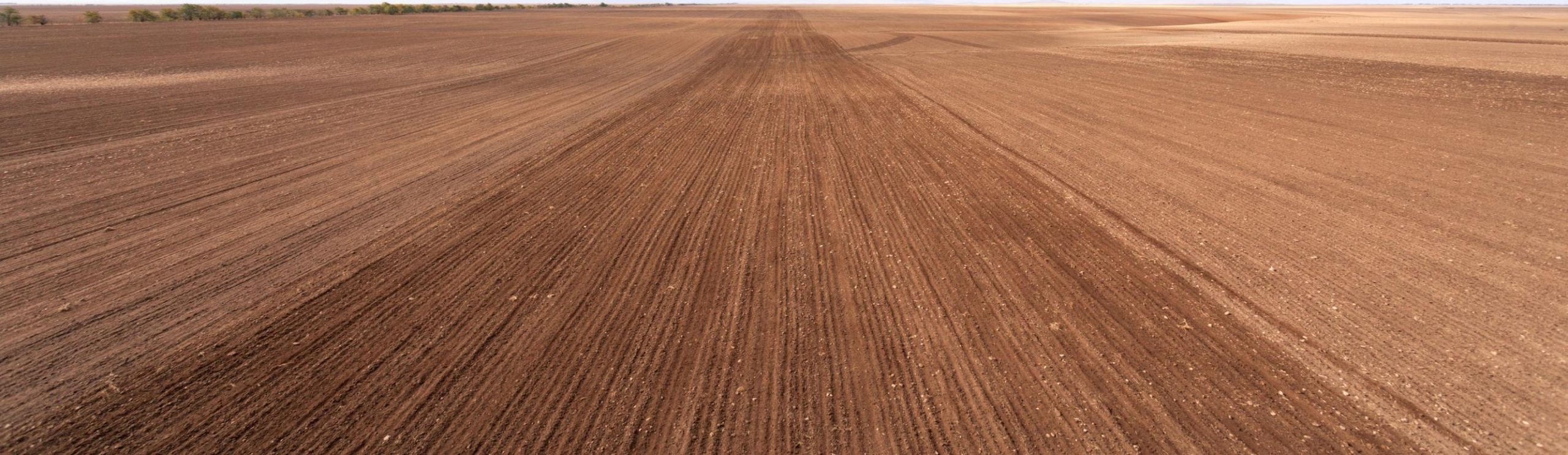
It's not for lack of space

It's important to note that the issue preventing American growers from keeping pace with rising consumer demand is not a lack of natural resources or an inability to expand production on U.S. soil.

Acres to Spare

As much as 670,000 acres of land that once supported fresh fruits and vegetables could, in most cases, be used to grow those products once again.

It would also be possible to transfer at least some of the roughly 240 million acres planted with wheat, corn, cotton or soybeans in 2013 into land bearing fresh fruits and vegetables.



And money to gain

Land bearing fresh vegetables or melons brought in an average of more than \$3,100 per acre in revenue in 2004, while the equivalent figure for land bearing food and feed grains, oilseeds, peanuts or cotton crops was \$237 per acre.





Fewer imported workers means more imported food.

Looking at only the major produce items, Americans ate 6.6 billion more pounds of imported fresh fruits and vegetables in 2010-2012 than they ate from 1998- 2000.

U.S. farms increased the amount they were growing during that period by just 854 million pounds—a shortfall of 5.5 billion pounds in total.

Lost Opportunities = Jobs Lost & Money Lost

- Had U.S. fresh fruit and vegetable growers been able to maintain the domestic market share they held from 1998-2000, it would have resulted in an estimated \$4.9 billion in additional farming income and 89,300 more jobs in 2012 alone.
- The increase in production would also have raised the U.S. Gross Domestic Product by almost \$12.4 billion that year.

Rapid Decline

- For several key crops, the share of fresh fruits and vegetables grown in the United States is dropping particularly rapidly. By 2012, the following amounts were imported:
 - Tomatoes: more than 50% imported
 - Avocadoes: 69% imported
 - Strawberries: 50% imported
 - Garlic: 56% imported
 - Asparagus: 90% imported
 - Cucumbers: 62% imported



Plowed Under

- Without enough workers, American farmers can't keep up with American consumers' demand.
- Some farmers are even plowing fields under, watching crops rot, and decreasing production even as demand for their crops increases.



Dairy Woes

- Thanks to a spike in yogurt consumption and production, the dairy industry in New York is booming and NY is now the third largest state for U.S. dairy production.
- That kind of production requires hands on the farm, something that has proved increasingly difficult to find for farmers of late.



Meeting Demand

This shortage comes at a time when the growing demand for yogurt actually requires the labor force for dairy farms to expand.

According to a report by the Cornell University Farmworkers Program, milk production in New York needs to increase by 15 percent within five years to meet the demand brought on by yogurt factories in the state, which would require an additional 100,000 cows and 2,225 workers.



A sad reality

"The sad reality today is that as good as American agriculture is, it's not as great as it could be," Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said, noting that farmers often can't harvest what they grow, or they decide not to plant, because they don't have a stable work force.



And they don't have a stable work force because our broken immigration system either keeps people in an unpredictable legal limbo if they're here without documentation - even though we depend on their hard work and expertise - or the system has no way of directing documented guest workers to where the need might be.



Recruiting Farther Afield

If policy remains unchanged and US sources of rural labor continue to diminish over time, US farmers may need to go further afield for workers, many who would likely have to be admitted legally.



If the current downward trend of migration continues and no alternative supply (such as from a revised H-2A program or earned legalization program) becomes available, farmers will most likely continue to experience ever greater difficulties finding workers during planting and harvesting seasons.

And with the need to meet consumer demand, the US will have an ever greater dependency on other nations to grow our food.

