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## AMID TRUMP'S IMMIGRATION CRACKDOWN, MORE MEXICANS GET VISAS TO WORK IN U.S.

*Demand in America is surging for Mexican farmhands, landscapers, hotel housekeepers and other temporary workers*

By Robbie Whelan  
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MEXICO CITY – Demand in America for Mexican farmhands, landscapers and other temporary workers is surging [as the Trump administration moves to curb immigration](#) and renegotiate its trade relationship with Mexico.

That demand is prompting both countries to search for ways to ease labor shortages in key parts of the U.S. economy.

In the first nine months of fiscal 2017, which began Oct. 1, the U.S. Labor Department certified more than 160,000 temporary workers – the bulk of them from Mexico – to harvest berries, tobacco and other crops in the U.S. under the H-2A agricultural visa program. That was up 20 percent from the period a year earlier.

The annual issuance of H-2A visas nearly doubled from 85,248 in fiscal 2012 to 165,741 in 2016. The U.S. doesn't cap the number of these visas.

Outside of agriculture, use of another type of seasonal-work visa also has surged in response to increased U.S. demand for unskilled laborers such as hotel housekeepers. The Department of Homeland Security in July [raised the annual cap on H-2B visas](#) by more than 20 percent to 81,000. The majority of workers receiving this type of visa also are from Mexico.

Among the employers that applied in the past year for guest workers under the H-2B program are two operations owned by the Trump Organization, the real-estate company controlled by President Donald Trump's family: [the Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida](#) and a Virginia vineyard. The Trump Organization declined to comment.

In raising the cap, DHS said it had "considered the needs of American businesses and other factors, including the impact on U.S. workers."

American farmers for several years [have voiced concerns about labor shortages](#), often paired with complaints about the H-2A visa program, which many see as overly bureaucratic, costly and time-consuming. The program requires employers to pay for food, housing and transportation for seasonal guest workers. Still, most farmers say the program is crucial to the U.S. agricultural industry.

"It's extremely burdensome," but cutting the program would "bring the industry to its knees" because there aren't enough U.S.-born farmworkers, said Steve Scaroni, owner of large-scale farms in several states and founder of Fresh Harvest, one of the largest

recruiters of H-2A workers in the U.S. "Within a week there wouldn't be salad in the store" if the program was canceled, he said.

In 2015, farmers in California's Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties, which grow roughly 30 percent of the strawberries in the U.S., reported \$13 million in losses because they lacked enough labor to harvest their crops in a timely manner.

Last year, vegetable farmers in the two counties reported they had 22 percent fewer workers than needed on average, while berry farmers put the worker shortage at 26 percent, according to a survey conducted by a local growers association.

"It's been a dire and ongoing problem for a few years," said Claire Wineman, the association's president.

Last week, Mr. Trump unveiled legislation alongside two Republican senators that would make the U.S. immigration system more merit-based and change how the country issues permanent resident cards to foreigners with the aim of raising wages. The proposal doesn't address temporary worker visas.

In early July, Mr. Trump and President Enrique Peña Nieto of Mexico agreed to explore new ways of allowing Mexican guest workers into the U.S., but stopped short of committing to an expansion of existing visa programs.

Mexico's government argues that the guest-worker programs help tamp down on illegal border crossings, a Trump administration priority.

"If there are possibilities to have legal, temporary immigration, that deals with the problem of the work force supply, and then you won't have an illegal immigration problem," said Idefonso Guajardo, Mexico's economy minister.

The U.S., Mexico and Canada are set to start renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement on Aug. 16. Mr. Guajardo said the renegotiation would likely address Nafta's professional visa program, which allows some skilled workers to live and work in Nafta countries.

Advocates for migrants have pushed to expand that program to include a broader range of professions. But U.S. Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue said in a recent interview that the Nafta talks likely won't address the concerns by U.S. growers about labor shortages.

Temporary worker visas [are controversial in Washington](#). In May, a bipartisan group of four U.S. senators wrote to the DHS urging it not to raise the cap on H-2B visas. They argued the program "puts all workers at risk" by eliminating U.S. jobs and depressing wages for American laborers, and by allowing some employers to abuse foreign guest workers, deprive them of wages and engage in human trafficking.

Immigration lawyers and migrant-rights groups say fraud in the recruitment of temporary workers is rising.

"We're really seeing an explosion in the H-2A program," said Rachel Micah-Jones, founder of the Center for Migrant Rights, a Mexico City organization that provides legal services to guest workers. "And we're hearing from workers that they're feeling more vulnerable."

The organization received 242 complaints related to fraud and other abuse by recruiters of Mexican guest workers in 2016. Complaints have risen by 30 percent so far this year.

Some employers garnish wages to cover the cost of transporting and housing workers, or discriminate against workers based on age or gender. Some recruiters charge fees to workers for scheduling visa interviews and arranging job contracts with U.S. companies, which is illegal under both U.S. and Mexican law.

José Gabriel Mayorga, a 23-year-old who earns less than the equivalent of \$6 a day working in fields of corn and beans in a mountainous region of Mexico's central Hidalgo state, paid close to \$2,000 in June to a recruiter who promised him and his cousin 11-month contracts to pick lettuce and cucumbers in Ohio for \$1,300 a week.

After taking the money, allegedly for administrative fees to process their visas, the recruiter disappeared, Mr. Mayorga said.

"Every day we hear about more and more fraud," said Adareli Ponce Hernández, an activist in Hidalgo who helps workers seeking temporary visas. Ms. Ponce worked for five years at a chocolate factory in Louisiana on an H-2B visa. When she tried to apply for a new job with higher wages, she was deceived three times by shady recruiters, she said.

"It's a fundamental part of this that there be transparency in recruitment," she said.