

Temporary Foreign Workers in the Carolinas & Beyond

David Griffith
East Carolina University
Greenville, NC

Temporary Foreign Worker Programs (TFWPs)

- TFWPs have been growing in importance in the U.S., Canada, and elsewhere.
- TFWPs are one of many manifestations of so-called “flexible labor regimes”
- TFWPs are but one of many ways that the economies of two or more nation-states become integrated:
 - China-Canada example: growing TFWs, Chinese investment in Canadian agriculture, mining; China declared Canada an “approved tourist destination”.
 - Mexico-U.S. example: NAFTA and other restructuring disrupted the coffee economy, stimulating migration as one of several economic strategies.
- TFWPs often begin in crises or to address exceptional labor market needs, but then continue beyond them (e.g. WWII; 2010 Olympics in Vancouver, Canada).
- TFW often preferable to immigrants to anti-immigrant forces.



U.S. TFW Programs

- In U.S., low-skilled programs supply workers to agriculture, seafood processing, livestock, and other seasonal operations.
- H-2A supposedly for agriculture, but certifications include other occupations (e.g. Louisiana crawfish) and bring in highly skilled musicians, artists, professionals, etc.
- H-2B supposedly for nonagricultural seasonal occupations (e.g. racehorse attendants, Mid-Atlantic seafood processing).
- Numbers of H-2A & H-2B workers have been fluctuating over time, but have never reached the levels of the Bracero program (400,000/ year).



H-2A Certification Data (n=7,427)

- H-2A certifications in 53 U.S. Locations: every state and Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands, and Washington DC.
- 7,427 requests for over 105,000 workers; 94,218 certified for 6,757 employers.
- Important H-2A states:
 - North Carolina: 1,113 employers/ 17,000+ certifications (83% in tobacco; next largest, 7%, in Christmas trees).
 - Kentucky: 613 employers/ 5,600+ certifications (75% in tobacco; next largest, 11%, general Farmwork)
 - Virginia: 478 employers applied, but 271 certified for 3,500+ workers (89% in tobacco).
 - Idaho: 563 employers/ 4,300+ workers (40% irrigators; 15% shepherds; 22% general farmwork)
 - Texas: 332 employers/ around 3,000 workers (70% general farmwork)
 - California: 271 employers/ around 4,000 workers (77% shepherds)



Examples of “Crops” & Job Titles

Listed under “Primary Crops” (292)

- Alpacas
- Aquaculture
- Barley
- Build livestock structures
- Catfish
- Coffee
- Concrete for farm building
- Drop stick
- Feed
- Logs
- Milk
- Turtles
- Wheat

Job Titles (649)

- Alligator farm hand
- Bee keeper
- Camp cook
- Citrus truck driver
- Crawfish worker
- Greenhouse worker
- Hay cutter & baler
- Pecan laborer
- Pig monitor
- Stable hand
- Wool grader



North Carolina Tobacco

- H-2A tobacco workers work primarily in the eastern part of the state, in flue-cured tobacco.
- West to east geographical shift in tobacco production since the 2004 dismantling of government price supports/ smaller growers out.
- Auctions a thing of the past; company buying stations in their place.
- Production now on contract, and contracts stipulate that farms are not to use undocumented labor.
- Largest companies: Altria, Philip Morris Intl, RJR, Universal Leaf
- Many farms now subject to Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) standards, including labor management: compliance with MSWPA, housing regs, don't hire child or undocumented workers, pay attention to farm safety (including green tobacco sickness).
- Grower reps visit farms.
- Growers now have incentives to shift from undocumented to H-2A workers.



FLOC Presence in NC Tobacco

- Following victory with cucumber H-2A workers from boycott of Mt. Olive Pickle, now focusing on tobacco and specifically RJ Reynolds.
- Working with Oxfam America to develop a Community-Based Human Rights Assessment (COBHRA):
 - What impacts are private investments (i.e. those of tobacco companies) having on communities in terms of violations of human rights?
 - Tool to assess the risks associated with the investment on the community.
 - Assessing the impact of the tobacco industry on migrant farmworkers in North Carolina.
 - Finds lack of serious attention to workers or worker rights issues in GAP inspections, relying solely on grower-provided information.



H-2B workers in North Carolina

- 1988 NC, VA, and MD crab-picking houses began importing H-2B workers from Sinaloa and Tabasco
- Practice increased through the 1990s, replacing a former work force of principally African American women.
- By the beginning of the 21st century, many of the crab houses began going out of business, principally due to:
 - Development of new markets for hard and soft-shelled crabs
 - Decline of commercial fishing population
 - Imported crab meat (including Mexican imports).
- Currently, a few crab plants still open, along with fish houses, that hire immigrant workers (including H-2Bs and others).



Current Study of H-2B workers

- Working with 20 – 30 workers from Sinaloa who work in one North Carolina crab plant.
 - Almost all are women, the majority single mothers or women with histories of problems with men.
 - Come from an area of heavy industrialized agriculture and small-scale fishing across from Baja California.
 - Work in crab processing prior to coming to NC.
 - Spend around 6 to 8 months in NC, separated from families.
 - Emphasize educating their children rather than encouraging them to migrate.
- Finding former H-2B workers who have settled in North Carolina.



H-2B workers and settled immigrant population

- Have discovered several former H-2B workers who have opened businesses, married local men, and remained in North Carolina.
- Many H-2 workers are more highly educated than the undocumented Mexican and Central American workers.
- Formerly H-2 workers were isolated, but now there is considerable interaction between H-2 workers and migrant and immigrant Latinos due to the Latinization of rural North Carolina.
- Increased contact between TFWs and immigrants facilitates settling, breaking H-2 contracts.



Conclusions

- TFWPs are generally expanding worldwide and in the U.S., but some fluctuations/ declines in worker numbers are occurring due to industry-specific developments (e.g. NC crab, Gulf coast ship-building).
- Structural factors in sending and receiving states encourage or discourage participation in TFWPs (e.g. dismantling of tobacco supports).
- TFWPs can encourage general immigration as part of the integration of two economies.
- TFWs, although preferable to some anti-immigrant forces for returning home at end of work period, have increased opportunities to settle in U.S. with growth of co-ethnic populations.