



POLICY PAPER

INVESTING IN AGRICULTURAL WORKER TRAINING: Myths, Realities and Needs

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An estimated 800,000 agricultural workers work on farms in the San Joaquin Valley. Their labor is vital to creating the nearly \$6.5 billion in annual crop market value produced by those farms.¹ Despite the fact that they work for very low wages and usually spend several months unemployed each year, and despite their importance to the economy, agricultural workers do not have access to the job training programs most other low-wage workers do. However, our nation's agricultural sector can benefit if we provide its workers with job skills training.

This policy paper examines the need for job training for agricultural workers. To that end, it addresses three key questions:

- Do agricultural workers really need training?
- What are the myths and realities about their work?
- What kind of training do agricultural workers need?

THE NEED FOR AGRICULTURAL WORKER TRAINING

The agricultural sector is going through significant changes, driven by evolving consumer tastes, international trade rules and consolidation among retail grocers. The net effect has been that while some farms are merging into much larger holdings, many others are turning to smaller niche crops with specialized labor requirements. High-tech equipment is being used more than ever. At the same time, there is growing recognition that a stable, well-trained workforce can increase productivity and production quality while reducing labor costs.

Job skills training can help meet the labor demands of today's larger, more high-tech farms as well as niche producers, while creating a more stable workforce. Agricultural workers need skills to work in a wide variety of crops in their local region, or to work in several jobs on the same crop, so that they can piece together enough work to stay employed through the year. With a wider range of skills, agricultural workers can provide their labor to more growers. Having a larger skill set will also help them stay out of poverty and off the rolls of social service providers.

MYTHS AND REALITIES ABOUT AGRICULTURAL WORK

A series of four research reports completed for FIELD in 2001-02 shed light on the need for agricultural worker training. These reports dispel some common myths about agricultural work.

MYTH: Agricultural worker labor is unskilled. A worker can move between crops without needing any new skills.

FACT: While much of the work agricultural workers do requires generalized physical skills, each crop has specialized tasks that a person must be properly trained to do. Many jobs require workers to apply judgment and recognition of unique traits; others require finely tuned motor skills. All of these skills take time to learn, and time to perfect before the agricultural worker is fully proficient.

¹ **Agriculture Census for California, 1997.** Available at <http://govinfo.library.orst.edu/cgi-bin/ag-list?01-state.cas>.

MYTH: Agricultural workers already piece together enough jobs to get about a full year's worth of work.

MYTH: Agricultural work is not a viable career path with opportunities for advancement.

MYTH: The current system distributes labor efficiently, and does not need to be changed.

MYTH: Agricultural workers like things the way they are and don't want any training.

MYTH: Growers are not interested in training for their workers.

FACT: It is true that many, if not most, agricultural workers work for three or more different employers on three or more different crops, in four or five different kinds of jobs. However, the average agricultural worker still only puts together enough work to be employed about eight months of the year. Their annual median income is \$7,500-10,000.

FACT: Most agricultural workers do this work for their entire lives. A survey of more than 350 workers found that most plan to continue doing the same work. As in other industries, some will learn specialized skills to move into advanced positions; some will become supervisors. Job training programs can ensure that many more, including women, are able to move up the career ladders available in agriculture.

FACT: Every time one job ends and an agricultural worker seeks another, he or she loses at least a few days of paid work. That loss of labor constitutes lost productivity for growers. By training workers to do more jobs within the same crop, or to work on more crops, the number of days lost to jobs searching could be reduced.

FACT: Our survey found the vast majority of agricultural workers are interested in receiving training for other agricultural jobs. Many of them said they would like to get training so they can work during times when they are normally unemployed, even if it pays less than what they usually earn.

FACT: Growers understand the benefits of increasing workers' skills. In a unique partnership between Bear Creek rose growers and the United Farm Workers union, workers were given problem-solving and basic skills training. As a result, production quality improved, and their percentage yield for premium roses increased 33%.

THE KIND OF TRAINING AGRICULTURAL WORKERS NEED

Agricultural workers need three basic kinds of training: basic life skills, specific job skills, and career advancement skills. Life skills include problem solving, communication and vocational English, which can be applied to any job. Specific job skills allow individuals to move laterally from one crop to another, or from one job to another within a single crop. These allow an agricultural worker to find more work during the year. Career advancement offers training in higher-level skills such as tractor driving and pesticide application, that enable an agricultural worker to move up into a better-paying job with more benefits and more responsibility.

THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY BENEFITS

Job training will not only benefit agricultural workers, but also their communities. Increased productivity translates into lower input costs for growers. A more highly skilled workforce will help growers respond more rapidly to demand changes. At the same time, agricultural workers with more skills can work more months in the year, reducing their dependence on social services. As they earn more, they will spend more, boosting the regional economy. Reducing poverty will reduce social problems. The increased productivity and produce quality, as well as the potential cost savings to growers, will also benefit many Americans, making our agricultural products more competitive on the market and potentially keeping down food costs for consumers.

Investing in agricultural worker training is good for workers, growers, consumers, and the broader community. It will create a more stable workforce that is better prepared to meet the changing demands in this vital sector of the American economy. Please contact FIELD at 310-392-0291 if you have any questions or want more information.