

***League of Women Voters Grand Traverse Leelanau Unit
Committee Report on a Study of the Agricultural Migrant Worker Visa
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THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL AGRICULTURE AND ITS WORKERS

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Agriculture is Michigan's second largest industry. Agricultural production, processing, and related businesses employ over a million Michigan residents and generate \$7 billion for the economy of the state.

Michigan has more than 10 million acres of farmland in 54,900 farms, with an average farm size of about 180 acres. The state's microclimates support the growth on a commercial basis of more than 200 commodities. Nationally, Michigan is second in crop diversity. 50% of those crops cannot be harvested mechanically. ¹The key to Michigan's agriculture during the 20th century was specialization that utilized the state's great diversity of soil, topography, and climate rather than the general agriculture of an earlier era.²

This specialization continues into the 21st century, although there is a growing trend to small scale but profitable fresh market farming.

As a frame of reference, Here are some 2010 Michigan production national ranking statistics:

- 1st for tart cherries, producing 72% of the US total
- 1st for pickling cucumbers, squash, blueberries, geraniums, and petunias
- 2nd for beans, carrots, celery, and plums
- 3rd for asparagus, apples, and wholesale floriculture products
- 4th for snap beans, sweet corn, and strawberries
- 5th in processed vegetable production
- 8th in fresh vegetable and milk production
- 13th in hog production ³

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of agriculture to the Michigan economy, and even more so for our local area. Census of Agriculture statistics focus on the northwest Lower Michigan region of Antrim, Benzie, Grand Traverse, Kalkaska, Leelanau, and Wexford counties. Direct and indirect economic impact is nearly \$140 million, with more than 2000 farm proprietors in the region employing more than 3000 Michigan workers, for a total of \$19.4 million in farming related income in 2006. Some of those dollars are spent at other local businesses extending impact of agricultural incomes.⁴

In terms of its share of economic activity, the northwest Lower Michigan region is four times more dependent on agriculture than is the state overall, since a great proportion of that economic activity originates with agriculture, as opposed to manufacturing and other businesses. Agricultural related sales amount to approximately ½ of all retail sales and more than 1/3 of manufacturing sales in the region, and are equal to the value of sales in the professional service sector.⁵

Narrowing our scope, Leelanau County, with a population of only 21, 898, and an area of 222,193 acres, appears 7 times in Michigan top 20 ranking.

- #1 in acres of sweet cherries (4,304)
- #2 in acres of tart cherries (9,514)

1 A Look at Michigan Agriculture www.agclassroom.org/mi

2 Michigan Agricultural Statistics 2007-2007 www.geo.msu.edu/geogmich/ag_hist

3 A Look at Michigan Agriculture www.agclassroom.org/mi

4 US Department of Agriculture, Census of Agriculture (2002), Michigan State and County Data. www.agcensus.usda.gov

5 Northwest Michigan's Farm Factor, Doug Kreiger for Michigan Land Use Institute

- #3 in acres of fruit and tree nuts (16,312)
- #5 in revenue from fruits, tree nuts and berries (\$28,975,000)
- #6 in number of farms using organic production methods (19)
- #8 in number of acres of apples (1,503)
- #9 in whole food processing plants (40)⁶

Additionally, Leelanau County's nearly 200 farms produce corn, hay, livestock, millions of pounds of milk, and an abundance of crops and products too extensive to list here⁷

The statistics support what those who live here understand to be true: agriculture is essential to the quality of life and livelihood of the area. The number one economic driver, tourism, is inextricably entwined with the beauty and product of our farms. Visitors enjoy the farmers markets, u-picks, farm stands, and fresh and locally sourced restaurant meals. The value of direct to consumer farm product sales in 2009 was \$440,000.⁸

Seasonal workers have been essential to the operation of area farms since the transition from subsistence farming in the early 20th century. Agriculture was the principal livelihood for Michigan residents throughout the 1800s, but by the turn of the century, the Industrial Revolution was transforming agriculture from a small, self-sufficient family art to a large, mechanized, scientific industry. The tractor, the telephone, and the automobile revolutionized cultivation, communication, and transportation, and rural isolation was broken. Although farm conditions improved, people left the farms in droves and resettled in the cities. Rural depopulation became so severe during the 1920s that many farmers and growers had to import migrant labor.⁹

The need for migrant labor has ebbed and flowed over the years. World War II was the catalyst for the Bracero Program, which from 1942 to 1964 brought Mexican migrant agricultural workers to the US legally. The program increased Michigan's reliance on Mexican farm workers for harvest, and when the program ended, many workers continued to work in US agriculture.¹⁰

Some crops, such as cherries, are suitable for mechanical harvest, minimizing the need for seasonal workers, but others, such as apples, strawberries, and asparagus, must still be picked by hand and require a large labor pool for a very short span of time.

The domestic seasonal labor pool in the Leelanau area is inadequate to fill the needs of the farmers. Young workers are largely unskilled in agricultural work, and prefer full season tourism related summer jobs to short term harvest work. The same is true of older workers who seek summer employment.¹¹

Migrant workers who follow the crops are essential to the Michigan farmer, and to the production of a secure domestic food supply. Without a dependable labor pool, growers cannot plant and produce; without product, local processors cannot operate.

A dependable, safe domestically produced food supply, subject to US FDA standards, is of extreme importance to our food security. Imported food products are not subject to the same standards of production and labeling as are US products, and only a small percentage of imports are inspected. We have all heard the news of dangerous additives, toxins, chemical residues, and unhygienic production practices affecting imported foods. At every step in the supply chain there is contamination and spoilage danger.¹²

6 Michigan Food and Agricultural Systems Profiles, www.michigan.gov/documents/mda/co pgs. 19&20

7 www.leelanau.cc/agriculture

8 Michigan Food and Agricultural Systems Profiles, www.michigan.gov/documents/mda/co pg. 20

9 Michigan Agricultural Statistics 2006-2007 www.geo.msu.edu/geogmich/ag_hist

10 Michigan and the Bracero Program homepages.wmich.edu/

11 Employer interview 12/1/2011

12 www.fao.org/trade/docs/LDC/foodqu

It makes good sense to ensure that US farmers and processors have access to the resources required, including an adequate labor pool, for safe and abundant domestic food production, rather than to export our food production jobs and their economic benefits.

Note: The statistical data included is drawn from a variety of reliable sources, and those sources cite differing time frames and geographic areas, sometimes with supporting references and sometimes not. Since the statistics are used here for general background and context, discrepancies have been disregarded as not materially affecting this report.