

**League of Women Voters Grand Traverse Leelanau Unit  
Committee Report on a Study of the Agricultural Migrant Worker Visas  
February 1, 2012**

**Summary****Suzanne Hoff**

Thank you, study committee members.

Before we go to questions, I would like to address the question often heard, why don't farm employers just pay workers more money to attract U.S. workers? Here is some current wage information to consider.

The Michigan minimum wage is \$7.40. The minimum hourly wage required for those working under the H-2A visa is the adverse effect wage rate (AEWR) currently at \$10.78 in Michigan.

Local Best Buy sales associates average \$9.70/hr. The Geek Squad employee average is just over \$12.00/hr. Meijer, another employer in Traverse City, pays a cashier minimum wage to \$9.00. A clerk/stocker may earn minimum wage to \$10.00/hr with heavy lifting duties. A department supervisor begins at \$10.00/hr. All employees must "possess excellent stamina and work ethics."

One local farm employer interviewed, owner of a midsized cherry and apple farm, pays its first year workers \$8.50/hr. If they last the full season, they receive a bonus of \$1.00 for every hour worked. The experienced Hispanic migrant workers are paid \$9.50 to \$11.00/hr. Piece work (lug, bushel, etc.) may earn a harvest worker up to \$200/day or \$25/hr. for an eight hour day.

Domestic workers will drive equipment and do office work, but rarely accept field work. The work can be hard and monotonous, the weather uncomfortable and the days often 10-12 hours long, including weekends. A skilled, reliable worker is fast, careful to protect the plants and soil, will work a long day and return the next day on time and ready to do the same work all over again until the job is done.

In summary, our committee has found that agricultural employers in Leelanau, Grand Traverse and Benzie Counties want to hire seasonal, skilled, reliable workers, and in the case of migrant workers – legal workers. When U.S. citizens aren't available or willing, can there be a streamlined, simple, agricultural migrant visa program? We encourage you to further deepen your understanding of this issue. Talk to our agricultural employers and their workers. Study the legislation. Call or write your representatives.

Thank you for attending this League of Women Voters program.

Further information on the national discussion.

Here is a summary of some of the national arguments for and against an agricultural seasonal guest worker visa.

\*Guest workers often choose to work for or are paid lower wages than citizens would agree to work for.

Thus, less skilled American citizens are paid lower wages in agricultural jobs because of available foreign workers..

But then our produce and food products are competitive with lower priced imported agricultural goods.

(The current H-2A agricultural guest worker program requires the employer to offer the higher of the: prevailing wage by state (\$7.40, MI), the Federal minimum wage (\$7.25) or the adverse effect wage rate (AEWR), (\$10.78, MI) as determined by the Dept. of Labor. The AEWR is based on the average hourly wage for a broad category of field and livestock work over a wide geographic area.

The FAIR LABOR STANDARDS ACT (FLSA), 29 C.F.R. PART 780.102, 2/1/1969, section 6(a)(5) provides that any employee employed in agriculture must be paid at least \$1.30 an hour. There are exemptions within this Act for agricultural workers other than the H-2A visa.

\*American citizens of any age will not take agricultural labor and processing jobs in any economy.

They don't like the hard work, long hours, the weather, working weekends, or seasonal nature of the jobs.

The skills of agricultural maintenance, harvesting and processing are not valued work skills.

U.S. workers may take driving, delivery and office positions in agriculture.

Parents aren't teaching their children the value of hard work.

\*Decreasing or eliminating legal guest workers will inevitably create more incentive to come to this country illegally.

Working in the United States hurts the home country by reducing their workforce.

Guest workers, by definition, will return to their home country.

Guest workers do not return to their home country, documents expire, and they become illegal residents.

More migrant workers means more opportunity for terrorists, drug dealers, and other criminals to enter the country.

Excess of guest workers inhibits mechanization and technological innovation.

Hand harvesting is hand harvesting. Innovation would be modest.

A streamlined, simple, single focus agricultural migrant visa program would enhance the potential for agricultural employers to hire legal, skilled workers when needed.