

Study takes snapshot of ag workers

Report examines farmworkers' impact on state economy

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Low wages are the No. 1 reason farmworkers leave their job.

That's according to a three-month study conducted last fall by the Short Term and Accelerated Training & Agriculture Programs at Chemeketa Community College and the National Economic Development and Law Center in Oakland, Calif. The report was prepared for the Farmworker Institute for Education & Leadership Development, a nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening the nation's agricultural sector.

Results of the survey, called the "Agricultural Skills & Career Ladders Project," were released Thursday during a symposium at the Chemeketa Eola Viticulture Center in West Salem.

"If you want to encourage employees to stay on the job, you have to pay them more (money) or you're going to lose them," Ron Henri, the senior vice president of the Medford-based Bear Creek, which harvests apples, told those in attendance.

The report was commissioned by Gov. Ted Kulongoski's office and is part of a new initiative aimed at improving the competitiveness of Oregon's agricultural industries and strengthening rural communities in the state.

Farmworkers are an integral part of Oregon's agricultural industry, which dominates the economy of many rural counties, researchers said.

Beyond wages, keeping ag workers on the job requires offering them job-skills training programs, education programs, learning more about the workers' culture and embracing their labor practices, the study found.

Agriculture plays a vital role in Oregon's economy. The nursery and vineyard industries are a substantial part of that sector. The FIELD study focused on those two industries in the Willamette Valley and included responses from employers and workers in those sectors.

In 2004, the state's nursery and greenhouse growers produced \$951 million worth of products, and the total value of the 2004 harvest of wine grapes was \$32.2 million, according to the study.

An estimated 8,000 farmworkers are employed in both industries, according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service.

Of those, 73 percent are male and 27 percent are female.

Although the survey did not specify if there were wage differences between male and female workers, it found that entry-level wages differed for each sector.

The average entry-level pay for nursery workers in the Willamette Valley ranged from \$7.25 to \$8 per hour, compared with vineyard workers who earned between \$7.25 and \$9 per hour.

Those wages are reported to be higher than the national average because of Oregon's higher minimum-wage rate.

The survey also found that, contrary to common perceptions, only 14 percent of vineyard workers and 6 percent of nursery workers migrate in search of work. Most are of Mexican origin.

Sixty-two percent of nursery workers reported that they are employed year-round, compared with just 35 percent of vineyard workers. The vast majority of the workers surveyed said they wanted to continue working in agriculture.

At Lumos Wine in McMinnville, 10 workers are employed at the vineyard year-round, said Dai Crisp, the owner.

Work-force facts

The survey concluded that vineyard and nursery workers in the Willamette Valley are not migratory workers but instead remain in the state when the ag season ends. The study also finds that 21 percent of workers are bilingual in Spanish and English, and 5 percent speak indigenous languages.

"As an employer, one of my goals is to find ways to keep workers employed all year," said Crisp, adding that during harvesting time in October, the number of workers on the job swells to 30.

"Another one of my goals is to get workers up to a living wage," he said. "Right now, all our workers make above \$10 an hour."

The vast majority of workers surveyed indicated that they want access to formal training. Some 72 percent of nursery workers and 65 percent of vineyard workers said they'd like to be taught English. Learning to use a computer was the second most-desired type of training for nursery workers.

Training in machinery and equipment operation was second for vineyard laborers. Meanwhile, 95 percent of employers surveyed identified low literacy skills and limited English proficiency as barriers that prevent workers from advancing into a higher paying position.

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