

Better Enforcement Of Existing Migrant Worker Protection Laws Needed

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A new paper from North Carolina State University argues that federal farm subsidies contribute to the migration of both legal and illegal farm labor into the United States and that, since federal actions are an impetus for the influx of migrant labor, the federal government should do a better job of enforcing laws designed to protect those workers.

“We have agricultural subsidies at the federal level that are huge,” says Dr. Robert Peace, a professor of accounting at NC State and author of the paper. “For example, corn is highly subsidized. Because of our subsidies, and the North American Free Trade Agreement, U.S. farmers can sell corn in Mexico cheaper than Mexican farmers can grow it. As a result, since farm [workers](#) can’t make any money farming in Mexico, they come to the [United States](#) as migrant workers. Poverty fuels migration.”

Peace argues that, since this migration is an unintended consequence of the U.S. farm subsidy program, the federal government should do a better job of enforcing existing laws that exist to ensure the health and safety of those workers.

Peace points to the H2A farm workers, who are in the country legally on temporary visas. These workers, Peace says, are subject to audit inspections by state agencies, to ensure that the workers are being paid a legal wage and have safe living and working conditions.

The inspectors who perform these audits are competent, Peace says, but there are not enough of them. North Carolina, for example, had 1,600 registered camps for migrant workers in 2009 - and the state's Labor Department estimated that there could have been thousands of unregistered camps. Peace notes that, when he was writing the paper in 2009, the North Carolina Labor Department had only 15 full-time inspectors who were responsible for ensuring the adequacy of all of the camps.

“Regardless of whether they are here legally or illegally, migrant workers are vital to healthy production levels from U.S. farms,” Peace says.

“They are part of the system that puts food on our tables.”

Approximately one-third of the agricultural labor force in the United States consists of hired [farm workers](#) - and half of those hired workers are here illegally, Peace says. “But they are key contributors to U.S. farm production, and our own subsidies are a big reason they're here. For those reasons, we should demand more and better enforcement of laws that were written to protect [migrant workers](#).”

The paper, “Auditing State And Federal Protections For Migrant And Seasonal Agricultural Workers,” will be published in a forthcoming issue of the *International Journal of Critical Accounting*.

Provided by North Carolina State University

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