

MEAT OF THE MATTER

The U.S. Pork Industry Needs a Viable Workforce

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The Situation

There is a severe shortage of labor in the pork industry both on farm and in packing plants. NPPC is actively advocating for reform of the H2-A visa program.

The U.S. pork sector is an engine of growth in the rural economy. The industry generates more than 550,000 jobs and provides economic growth and prosperity in rural areas throughout the country. From 2001 to 2015, pork production employment grew 2.1% annually, a rate three times faster than employment growth in the rest of the economy. Total and weekly wages also grew significantly faster than the U.S. average over this 15-year span. Despite growing opportunities for employment and rapid wage growth, the sector struggles to find workers.

Raising pigs is no easy task. Sows give birth to baby pigs throughout the year. Pigs are fed and watched over daily by skilled caretakers and animal health professionals, and ultimately shipped to market to provide a safe and wholesome food product for consumers worldwide. In 2018, the U.S. pork sector harvested more than 124 million animals. According to USDA projections, 2019 pork production is expected to be a record 27.3 billion pounds, increasing the need for workers on farms to care for pigs.

Finding reliable, capable workers is becoming more difficult. As of June 7, 2019, the national unemployment rate was 3.6%. Rural regions of the country, particularly those with large hog inventories, experience even tighter labor supplies. Many of these areas have an aging workforce and have experienced negative population growth since 2010.

According to a study from Iowa State University economists, a reduction in the foreign-born workforce would not be offset by native-born workers and permanent residents. In fact, a change in immigration policy aimed at restricting access to foreign-born workers would increase production costs and decrease agricultural output. As a result, rural economic growth could be jeopardized.

Compounding the demographic realities faced by the pork sector is a visa system that fails to meet the unique needs of livestock production.

The H-2A Visa Program

The H-2A visa program was created in 1987 under the Immigration Reform and Control Act. The H-2A visa allows a foreign national entry into the United States for temporary or seasonal agricultural work. Terms of work can be as short as one month and up to ten months. The U.S. Department of Labor Wage and Hour Decision is responsible for auditing and inspecting H-2A employers to ensure guest workers are not unfairly exploited.

| State | Unemployment Rate |
|----------------|-------------------|
| Iowa | 2.4% |
| North Carolina | 4.1% |
| Minnesota | 3.3% |
| Illinois | 4.4% |
| Indiana | 3.6% |
| Nebraska | 3.0% |
| Missouri | 3.3% |
| Ohio | 4.1% |
| Oklahoma | 3.2% |
| Kansas | 3.5% |
| U.S. | 3.6% |

