

Latino Dairy Workers in Vermont

Vermont has been proactive in adapting to the influx of Latino migrant farmworkers who are helping to preserve that state's iconic dairy farms.

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Dairy farming dominates Vermont agriculture, providing 74 percent of all income from agricultural sales and 62 percent of New England's milk as of 2010.¹ The image most closely associated with Vermont is a farm with grazing cows, but a difficult economy has led to a loss of farms.

Although some blame volatile milk prices and high costs, the shortage of farm labor is also an issue. As dairy farmers turn to Latino labor, Vermont has adapted, proactively addressing challenges such as safety and differences in language and culture. And it has done so in a way that strengthens its brand of just, sustainable agriculture.

The Data

Beset by milk prices periodically lower than production costs, Vermont's dairy farms declined from 1,012 in 2010 to 961 in 2012.² The average farm size grew, and farmers began to experience labor shortages. A 2005 Vermont Farm Bureau survey of 239 farmers found 47 percent believed there was a labor shortage; 28 percent wanted information on how they could hire Latinos.³

A 2010 survey of 61 farmers found that 75 percent perceived a shortage of domestic farm labor; 37 percent thought that the Latino labor supply was sufficient to fill the need.⁴ Erin Shea, director of the University of Vermont Extension's Migrant Education Program (VMEP), estimates that Vermont currently has 1,200-1,500 Latino farmworker families.⁵



Most of the workers are believed to lack documentation.⁶ They stayed out of the public eye until 2006, when Vermont Public Radio did a series on migrant labor.⁷ Since then, state agencies, nonprofits, and the general public have stepped up to address such challenges as culture and language.

Prior to the Latino farmworkers' arrival, the state had few native Spanish speakers. A 2009 survey of Latino workers highlighted language problems: only 23.5 percent of farms had a Spanish-speaking manager; barely 2 percent of Latino workers could speak English well.⁸

Despite language barriers, 97 percent of farmers hiring Latinos have said their experience was good or very good. After all, foreign-born Latinos work 69 hours per week and report wanting to work 72 hours, whereas U.S.-born farm employees work 56 hours per week on average and would rather work 52 hours. (See "Actual vs. Ideal Work Hours per Week.") Additionally, the 2010–2011 starting wage for Latino workers was \$7.63 per hour—83.3 percent of the starting wage for other workers. The gap in 2012 wages is even larger, possibly reflecting the fact that the native born have worked in local agriculture, on average, 18 years more and that Latino workers receive benefits such as housing and paid utilities.

Actual vs. Ideal Work Hours per Week

	Number of hours per week (respondents)	
	U.S.-born	Foreign-born Latino respondents
Average hours worked	55.5 (21)	68.7 (83)
Ideal hours	52.4 (17)	71.8 (83)
Minimum hours	45.0 (15)	62.2 (78)

Source: Author's research.

The majority of Latino dairy workers are Mexican males; the median age is 26. Seventy percent arrived here less than three years ago, and the average worker expects to return home in two years. About half are married, but only 18 percent live with their spouse in the United States. Shea notes that Latino workers in Vermont generally do not bring their families. Thus in 2010, when 81 workers were asked about remittances, 99 percent said they sent money to family once a month. Nearly 60 percent said they sent at least half of their earnings home.⁹

Latino Migrant Health

Twenty-five percent of Vermont's Latino farmworkers report having to use hand signals to communicate on the job, and the potential for miscommunication heightens the risk of injury. Working often as milkers, farmworkers are exposed to slipping, getting stepped on, or suffering repetitive-motion injuries.

UVM Extension's Migrant Health Coordinator Naomi Wolcott-MacCausland says that "more than a third of Latino farmworkers seen during outreach health visits identified some kind of musculoskeletal pain that they had not sought care for."¹⁰ In fact, few Latino workers use health care here: 76 percent said the last time they went to a clinic was in Mexico; 24 percent said they would return home if they had a major health issue.

Vermont Adapts

University of Vermont graduate student Marta Ascherio and a panel found that of 37 Vermont organizations serving Latino migrants, most began seeing such clients only after 2001, with the greatest growth occurring in the past six years.

Agricultural Extension

As a land-grant institution, UVM offers extension services to the agriculture sector. As one of the first groups to note the arrival of Latino farmworkers, VMEP hired bilingual staff and provided on-farm education to migrant youth. Observing also that the challenges facing workers and farmers were often interconnected, it designed training programs focusing on the whole system. For example, its "Farming across Cultures" assisted farmers and workers with linguistic and cultural communication. It also partnered with regional health association Bi-State Primary Care and local clinics to develop *Puentes a la Salud* (Bridges to Health), which focuses on removing barriers to health care for Latino workers.

Such efforts are important. As Latino labor specialist David Chappelle puts it, working successfully with this population "requires farm managers to use proactive techniques that increase their cultural awareness and occupational Spanish skills, and to adapt their hiring, training, and work protocols to provide stability for an inherently mobile labor supply."

State and Local Government

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets has also developed programs, including an intensive occupational-language program for dairy farmers.¹¹ It has collaborated with the Vermont Farm Bureau and others to bring the Mexican consulate to the state to issue Mexican citizens an identification card, the *matricula consular*.

The card has facilitated local and statewide efforts to improve public safety through the adoption of bias-free policing policies.¹² The police chief of Middlebury, which adopted a bias-free policy, indicates why. "There's a potential for a subculture to develop where people don't report things here. They are easily subject to predation from others [who] know they won't report anything. I'm worried about somebody seeing a fire, or somebody that needs help, not picking up the phone and calling us."¹³

Public Opinion

Vermont has seen less controversy about migrant workers than many other states. Residents know that dairy farms use such labor. In the 2010 statewide Vermonter poll, 72 percent had heard about migrant farmworker issues. Perhaps more telling, in a 2012 state-



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wide poll, 65 percent of respondents said they had personally spoken with a farmer or a member of a farm family, and 86 percent said they agreed or strongly agreed that having the new workers helps Vermont farms stay in business. Seventy-two percent said they favored the adoption of bias-free policies, and 83 percent favored development of a three-year guest-worker program.

When Vermont's congressional delegation failed to get an expansion of the federal government's temporary visa program to include dairy-farm workers, state legislators took up the issue. Although an effort to develop a state-level guest-worker program did not make it out of the Vermont House, the general assembly found that migrant workers' inability to access medical care, obtain basic services, and fulfill employment responsibilities without identification was a significant challenge, and a committee was set up to study the feasibility of issuing state driving licenses.

Surprising as it may seem, Vermont is turning out to be a leader in pragmatic models for integrating a foreign population into a classic pastoral landscape.

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Endnotes

1 See "Vermont Farm to Plate Strategic Plan," <http://www.vsjf.org/project-details/5/farm-to-plate-initiative>.

2 Daniel L. Scruton (dairy programs section chief, Vermont Department of Agriculture Food and Markets) in discussion with the author, November 2, 2012.

3 T. Buskey, "Vermont Farm Bureau Dairy Industry Labor Survey: Final Results" (report, Vermont Farm Bureau, Richmond, Vermont). Contact the author at tbuskey@gmavt.net.

4 D. Baker, "Public Policy Research: Implications for Foreign Labor Policy in Vermont" (testimony before the Vermont Senate Agricultural Committee, February 22, 2012).

5 Erin Shea (Director of UVM Extension's Vermont Migrant Education Program) in discussion with the author. Contact her at erin.shea@uvm.edu.

6 C. Radel, B. Schmook, S. McCandless, "Environment, Transnational Labor Migration, and Gender: Case Studies from Southern Yucatán, Mexico, and Vermont, USA," *Population Environment* (2010): <http://www.springerlink.com/content/46005211ngp23154/>.

7 J. Dillon, "Mexican Labor on the Farm," Vermont Public Radio, http://www.vpr.net/news_detail/74329/mexican-labor-on-farm-part-1---increasing-numbers.

8 D. Baker and D. Chappelle, "Health Status and Needs of Migrant Farm Workers in Vermont," *Journal of Agromedicine* (2012).

9 Author's research.

10 Naomi Wolcott-MacCausland (migrant health coordinator, Bridges to Health/*Puentes a la Salud*) in discussion with the author. Contact her at nwolcott@uvm.edu.

11 D. Baker and D. Chappelle, "In Vermont, *Se Habla Español*: Using Occupational Spanish to Help Dairy Farmers Manage a Changing Workforce," *Journal of Extension* (2012): <http://www.joe.org/joe/2012june/a7.php>.

12 Those policies are seen in a 2011 directive from Governor Peter Shumlin and the Department of Public Safety that says Vermont State Police "troopers should not try to identify people whose only suspected violation is that they are present in the United States without proper documentation, but also makes it clear that officers should continue to investigate suspected criminal activity," <http://governor.vermont.gov/newsroom-gov-shumlin-public-safety-announce-revised-bias-free-policing-policy>.

13 "VT Town Launches New Immigration Policy," *USA Today*, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007-10-31-2253429885_x.htm.