

## Trump's latest immigration restriction exposes a key contradiction in policy

What the exceptions to his proclamation reveal about agriculture in America.

By **Julie M. Weise**

Julie M. Weise, a historian at the University of Oregon, is at work on a global history of post-WWII temporary labor migrants.

June 23, 2020 at 8:41 a.m. PDT

Anti-immigrant rhetoric has been President Trump's most prominent brand, and he's used the coronavirus pandemic to double down on it by slashing legal immigration in the name of public health and "America First." He just signed a proclamation extending his shutdown of new immigration to include both the high-skilled temporary workers often destined for Silicon Valley, and most seasonal "nonagricultural" temporary workers in fields such as landscaping.

---

**Support our journalism. Subscribe today. →**

---

Yet in one area, Trump has continued his policy of "the more immigrants, the merrier" this year: bringing in immigrant

farmworkers. In 2019, his administration approved a quarter-million temporary agricultural visas, known as H-2A or “guest worker” visas — a 55 percent increase from President Barack Obama’s final year in office. So far this year, the Trump administration is approving H-2A visas at a rate 15 percent faster than last year, and it took steps to make it easier for farmers to hire temporary farmworkers even after the pandemic began.

Why simultaneously accelerate immigration in agriculture while restricting it in other industries? Because American farmers have long found a way to access cheap, foreign-born labor in times of depression and prosperity, xenophobia and openness alike. They have accomplished this not only through political pressure, but by creating a public narrative that Americans “naturally” won’t do agricultural jobs. And for over a century, U.S. government and society looked the other way as farmers chose to become dependent on migrant labor to keep agricultural wages and conditions far behind other those in other industries.

AD

---

This story begins in the roaring 1920s, when the United States rapidly urbanized just as Asian and European immigrants were excluded or restricted. U.S. farmers became dependent on Mexican workers, and this continued into the Great Depression. The image of the Joads and other desperate white migrants from “The Grapes of Wrath” suggests that surely no farmers would have turned to immigrants as a labor source when so many Americans were starving. Yet this was not the case. Farmers believed a labor surplus was the only way they could get work done at affordable wages and that immigrant workers were still a necessary part of the mix.

Reflecting on the 1930s, a Bureau of Agricultural Economics official wrote in 1941 that even in times where the labor market was flooded with aspirants, “California asparagus growers believe that only Filipinos or Japanese can cut asparagus properly. White American workers are not supposed to be adaptable to the sugar-beet work of California and Colorado — although they do practically all of this work on the family farms of Utah and Idaho. Southern New Mexico cotton growers ... insist upon Mexican workers.”

The Depression of the 1930s brought anti-Mexican immigrant sentiment into the center of political discourse for the first time in

U.S. history. Local officials conducted high-profile raids that traumatized Mexican communities, and social workers presented unemployed clients with one-way tickets to Mexico. Up to 2 million Mexicans and Mexican Americans were deported or repatriated under pressure during that decade. But even as the U.S. government pushed thousands of people across the southern border, U.S. farmers continued to encourage a small yet steady stream of Mexican migrant workers to come north to their farms.

AD

Indeed, it was precisely during the Depression that U.S. academics and policymakers, acknowledging the persistent demand for

Mexican agricultural workers, started to envision a new type of migration category — a third way between open migration and total restriction. These thinkers proposed a temporary migration program, modeled on those France had negotiated with Italy and Poland. The idea was to enshrine in law a system that would allow farmers to get the Mexican labor they needed, while ensuring that these workers, “inferior to the whites, both physically and mentally,” in the words of economist Glenn E. Hoover, would not degrade America’s racial stock by settling down.

When U.S. entrance into World War II caused farmers to fear rural labor shortages, policymakers turned the idea for a bilateral temporary labor migration agreement into a reality: the Bracero Program, which brought more than 4 million Mexican men to the United States between 1942 and 1964. Labor unions argued that the program shortchanged American workers, including Mexican Americans, by providing subpar conditions and a ready army of strikebreakers, and their push to end the program gained traction by the 1960s.

The Bracero Program ended in 1964 under President Lyndon B. Johnson, yet the demand for these workers continued and

undocumented migration simply took Braceros' place. Often the same Mexican men continued their work for the same U.S. farmers, now as undocumented immigrants. Under pressure from farmers, the U.S. government turned a blind eye to this growing workforce. Furthermore, another wartime guest worker program, which had been used to import Caribbean labor, outlasted the Bracero program and expanded under President Ronald Reagan in 1986 to become today's H-2A agricultural and H-2B nonagricultural temporary visas.

AD

But many farmers had little incentive to recruit through the official channels when undocumented workers were available. The flow of

those workers continued unabated even as anti-immigrant sentiment rose among politically powerful white suburbanites in the 1990s. With bipartisan support, Bill Clinton became the first U.S. president to seriously attempt to stop Mexicans from crossing the border to work in the United States.

Yet despite the advance of a restrictionist agenda, it was farmers who won the day. In fact, when the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) launched the raids known as “Operation Southern Denial” in the Vidalia onion fields of Georgia in 1998, the state’s Republican senator jumped into action. Sen. Paul Coverdell accused the INS of interfering with “honest farmers who are simply trying to get their products from the field to the marketplace” and strong-armed the INS into suspending enforcement during the picking season. When high-profile immigration raids continued under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, agricultural areas were touched more lightly than other places due to political pressure from farmers.

Yet as undocumented workers faced greater difficulty reaching U.S. farms due to border enforcement, farmers’ use of the H-2A and H-

2B programs jumped. Under these programs, farmers pick up the tab for workers' recruitment and transport, and guarantee them a minimum wage set by the Department of Labor. While more expensive than hiring undocumented workers, farmers have been willing to pay for agricultural guest workers rather than raise wages and improve conditions to levels that would attract more local workers — particularly after a century of framing such work as “unsuitable” for Americans.

AD

Immigrants are not and have never been the only people willing to do agricultural work — but they have become the primary group of



people willing to do it with the wages and conditions that U.S. farmers have offered. In turn, they are the only ones who can keep our grocery bills as low as we now expect them to be. That's why in good economic times and bad, welcoming times and anti-immigrant times, farmers whatever their politics have done what it takes to keep the immigrant faucet open. With undocumented immigration all but halted in the pandemic, farmers' dependence on guest workers is only increasing, regardless of high unemployment or the risk to farmworkers' health.

That an industry so dependent on immigrant workers has embraced an anti-immigrant president is a contradiction in theory — but not in practice. Despite Trump's recent sweeping restrictionist moves, we now know that when it comes to agricultural labor, 2020 will be no different from any other moment in the past century, including the Depression and the anti-immigrant “crackdown” of the 1990s. As before, there is plenty of political will to demonize immigrants but almost none to restrict immigrant agricultural laborers or to change their working conditions for the better.