

Hispanic Labor in North Carolina's Christmas Tree Industry: Employer and Laborer Perspectives

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INTRODUCTION

Christmas tree production is a \$100 million-dollar per year industry in North Carolina. From a handful of entrepreneurs in the mid 1950's, the industry has grown to around 2,000 Christmas tree growers who produce approximately 20 percent of Christmas trees in the United States (NCSU Christmas Tree Genetics Program, 2001). Hispanic workers, primarily from Mexico, are prevalent among many of these Christmas tree producers and make up the majority of the labor force in this industry. However, little research has focused on this industry, its Hispanic labor force, and employer/laborer relationships within it.

The popular media and many advocacy groups typically focus on exploitation of migrant labor by labor contractors and unscrupulous employers. However, the relationships between employers and laborers are more multifaceted than these one-dimensional exposés. Empirical research is needed on the underlying social, political, and economic causes, costs, and benefits of an increased Hispanic presence in the US workforce. This paper presents preliminary data toward that end, gathered from interviews with Christmas tree growers and workers during the summer of 2001.

Rationale and Significance

Recent population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau (2001) indicate that almost 380,000 Hispanics now live in North Carolina. Although a majority of Hispanic migrants find work in urban areas in the service and construction sectors, many laborers are employed in the forestry and agriculture industries in rural areas (Arcury, et. al., 1999). However, due to the dynamic nature of Hispanic workers in the agricultural and forestry sector, scientists and agencies alike have great difficulty understanding aspects of this labor force (Griffeth & Kissam, 1995).

There are few references to Hispanic labor issues in North Carolina. Johnson, Jr. et al. (1999) recently addressed growth of North Carolina's Hispanic population across labor sectors. Arcury et al. (1998, 1999) have researched the impacts of pesticide exposure and other health issues of migrant workers in North Carolina. Leiter and Tomaskovic-Devey (2001) are examining growth and distribution of Latino employment and question the nature of ethnic replacement or succession in a number of North Carolina labor sectors. Their findings show an increased presence of Hispanic workers in manual labor jobs in urban areas of North Carolina. However, their source of data does not include Hispanics within the forestry/agriculture sectors of the economy.

An increasing migrant worker population represents a challenge to state agencies and industry associations that have historically worked together to address labor policy. Objective research is needed to understand the forces influencing the demand for immigrant labor in the United States. By vilifying employers of immigrant labor, news media as well as some researchers have made it increasingly difficult to approach these industry participants to conduct objective research without suspicion. More collaborative

approaches to research and education among these industry participants need to be considered. Cornelius (in Suarez-Orozco, 1998) challenges, “the traditional labor economics paradigm in which the presence of low-skilled immigrants in the U.S. economy is simply a function of employer greed and convenience coupled with inadequate governmental regulation of labor markets, has been exhausted (p. 140).” This research has the benefit of grounding the continued debate about migrant labor in better data and fleshing out some of the inherent ambiguities in these issues.

OBJECTIVES

The goal of the research is to establish baseline data regarding employer/laborer relationships and labor issues in North Carolina’s Christmas tree industry from the perspectives of the industry participants. In order to achieve this goal, the study:

- 1) Investigates how the labor force developed among North Carolina’s Christmas tree growers
- 2) Determines how workers are hired and trained
- 3) Assesses the advantages and disadvantages of:
 - a) employing Hispanic labor (from the employer perspective)
 - b) working in the Christmas tree industry (from the laborer perspective)
- 4) Analyzes the perceptions of labor policies/programs which affect employers and laborers

METHODS

The project uses both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to address the objectives of the study. Research methods consist of:

- document analysis of US Census and Department of Labor data and literature regarding migrant labor issues

- preliminary in-person interviews with workers, growers, and other professionals involved in the Christmas tree industry (including labor contractors, extensionists, and agency personnel)
- a mail survey to members of the North Carolina Christmas Tree Association (NCCTA)
- follow up in-person interviews with workers and growers

Preliminary Interviews

From May to August of 2001, 15 workers and 15 growers were interviewed from small (1,000 trees per year) to large (250,000+ trees per year) Christmas tree operations in four of the top-five producing counties in western North Carolina: Ashe, Avery, Jackson, and Watauga counties. Interviews were semi-structured and consisted of open-ended questions framed by the researcher. In addition, seven other agency personnel and individuals directly involved in the Christmas tree industry were interviewed—including county extension agents, Department of Agriculture and Dept. of Labor personnel, and the director of the North Carolina Growers Association.

Due to the perceived sensitivity of the research topic, growers who participated in preliminary interviews were purposefully sampled based on extensionists' recommendations and grower willingness to participate in the study. Likewise, due to the sensitive nature of intrusive research with migrant populations, workers were purposefully sampled for preliminary interviews by establishing contacts with individuals who were willing to participate.

Mail Survey and Follow-Up Interviews

A mail survey to be distributed in the spring of 2002 will elaborate on questions developed from the preliminary interview data. The survey will be sent to the 300+

members of the NCCTA—who represent almost 20% of the growers in western North Carolina and produce more than 60% of all Christmas trees produced in the state (NCCTA, pers. comm.). This mail survey will allow a broader collection of data than interviewing alone. Survey questions will be designed to collect demographic information of Christmas tree growers and address the study objectives. The mail survey will follow the tailored design method of Dillman (2000) that creates greater respondent trust, takes into account features of the survey situation, and strives to reduce overall survey error. Due to logistical challenges, Hispanic workers will not be sampled by mail.

Follow-up in person interviews will take place with growers after mail survey responses have been received to confirm, expand on, and clarify themes extracted from preliminary interviews and the mail survey data. Follow-up in person interviews with workers will allow elaboration on themes gained from preliminary interviews and comparisons between grower and worker viewpoints and perspectives. While larger sample sizes might increase confidence in the research findings, the critical determinant of sample size in this type of research is saturation (e.g. information overlap, redundancy, or conformation) during the research process (Elder and Miller, 1995).

Due to the logistical challenges of other sampling methods, in person, semi-structured interviews will be the only means by which Hispanic workers in the study will be sampled. However, preliminary interviews showed greater willingness to participate and confidence in the principal researcher than expected as well as a high degree of similar responses to interview questions.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The following sections provide preliminary research findings based on interviews conducted during the summer of 2001. The mail survey to growers and follow up interviews with workers and growers will allow further discussion of these themes.

Shift to Hispanic Labor

The first Hispanic (primarily Mexican) labor began appearing on the larger operations in the early 1980's as Christmas tree growers began more actively recruiting these workers. The majority of workers were migrant laborers who had been working other seasonal crops in the area such as fruit trees, tobacco, and tomatoes. Some growers mentioned that they recruited labor from the unemployment office where workers often sought employment after the tomato harvest. Several workers mentioned that there were very few of them (Mexicans) working in the region at that time.

Some factors contributing to this shift to Mexican workers in 1980s included:

- Increasing scarcity of local labor due to growth in number of farms requiring labor and low populations/work force in these counties
- Growth in average farm size (larger farms needed additional labor)
- More active recruitment of Hispanic workers from other crops by growers
- Growers who initially used Hispanic labor were impressed by their efficiency, work ethic, and reliability and began hiring more workers
- More long-term work for Christmas tree cultivation than other crops, which attracted laborers looking for steady work
- Worker and family networking (among Hispanic worker population) led to further influx of workers

Many growers feel that the influx of Hispanic labor has permitted the industry to grow as large as it has and have stated that the “industry would dry up if it weren’t for the Mexicans”. However, it appears that growers were expanding their operations anyway due to increasing demand and market stability for their trees. Hispanic migrant workers from other crops were the first and best available labor source they could find. Once word spread among the worker community that there was longer-term work available in Christmas trees, more workers began arriving. After the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) was implemented in 1986, a more permanent labor pool became available, as many migrant Hispanic workers began to settle in the area.

H2A Issue

The H2A program is part of IRCA that allows growers to employ alien workers with temporary work visas for contract farm work. In North Carolina, over 10,000 H-2A workers are recruited annually by the North Carolina Grower’s Association to participate in seasonal and temporary labor on farms throughout the state. Approximately 30 Christmas tree growers participate in the H2A program and contract workers through the North Carolina Growers Association (NCGA), a private labor contractor. In 2001, 575 workers were contracted through the H2A program for work on Christmas tree farms (NCGA, pers. comm.).

The H2A program was repeatedly mentioned as a point of contention related to Hispanic labor. Grower sentiment regarding the H2A issue within the Christmas tree industry is similar in other agricultural industries (Papademetriou and Heppel, 1999). Participants in the program consist primarily of larger producers (100,000+ trees per year). These growers maintain that the H2A program is the only way to legally maintain a

reliable labor supply. However, they feel unreasonably regulated by the Department of Labor and targeted by advocacy groups. Several large growers commented that the “little guys who are hiring illegal workers for less pay and less accountability deserve the scrutiny”.

Smaller growers commented that the H2A program is too expensive to make it worthwhile to participate. Under the H2A program, employers are required to provide housing, transportation, and guarantee at least 30 hours of work per week to guestworkers. Many smaller growers commonly hire “drive-up” workers on the spot for short-term jobs.

Recruiting

Workers are recruited and hired in a number of ways. Recruitment methods include:

- The grower searching out, recruiting, and hiring their own workers
- Using an American/local labor contractor
- Using a Hispanic contractor (who speaks English and recruits workers for contract work)
- “Borrowing” workers from other growers during weekends or for short-term jobs (commonly done by smaller-scale growers)
- Using the North Carolina Growers Association (H2A program)
- Contacting the Employment Security Commission
- Hiring “drive-up” workers on the spot
- Relying on workers who brings in other workers (friends, family, etc)

Based on interviews, wages for “freelance” workers differed within a range from minimum wage to over \$10.00/hr.—depending on the relationship between the grower

and worker. Growers in the H2A program are required to pay workers the adverse wage rate (defined by the prevailing best wage in similar industries within the state) of \$7.06/hour. Growers reiterated that workers want as many hours as possible: “Workers will look for something else if they don’t have 60 hrs. of work per week.” Several “freelance” workers agreed with this statement and mentioned that the only benefit of working as a freelancer is the “freedom to move from job to job.” Under the H2A program, workers cannot be employed by anyone other than their Department of Labor approved H2A employer.

Communication

The language barrier issue between Hispanic workers and growers in this industry is similar to many other industries. Most workers speak little to no English and growers speak little to no Spanish. However, many workers and growers rely on commonly used words and phrases for basic communication. Some growers and workers simply rely on one or two relatively bilingual individuals to do all communicating for them. Results from the mail survey should elaborate on the level to which employers feel that the language barrier affects their relationship with their labor force.

The workers’ perspective:

The following represent worker sentiment regarding work in the Christmas tree industry.

- Full-time workers can work from early March-December on a number of different tasks on the farm: planting and setting seedlings, fertilizing, shearing, spraying, and harvest.

- Seasonal workers can work specific jobs (shearing, spraying, harvest) for 40+ hrs. per week during those seasons.
- In other seasonal agricultural industries, work is more sporadic, less steady. Even in Christmas trees, some workers seek part-time employment in other jobs to maximize workable hours. However, during peak seasons, worker can work more than 80 hrs per week.
- Work varies: workers mention that work is a “little bit (un poquito)” less strenuous physically/less monotonous than in other crop industries. “Your back doesn’t hurt as much at the end of the day, like in potatoes.” Also mentioned climate in the mountains. One worker said: “It’s not as hot here in July as it is near Raleigh!”
- Several mentioned that workers from rural areas in Mexico like working in the area. Most workers interviewed were from Michoacan and San Luis de Potosi region—rural/mountainous areas of Mexico.
- Several workers mentioned that work availability is the number one factor in picking a job and staying there. “If there’s enough work, it doesn’t matter what crop it is; a person will stay...as long as you’re working enough hours, it’s good”.
- Cuts from shearing knives, poison ivy, and bees and wasps were the main occupational safety concerns.

General observations about Christmas tree industry and labor:

- The Christmas tree industry in North Carolina is a relatively young industry—a few growers in the fifties have gradually expanded to around 2000 growers today.

- Most farms are located in very rural, sparsely populated counties—little available local labor.
- Need for external labor source began in early-mid eighties with expansion of larger operations—today, most labor is Hispanic (Mexican).
- “Permanent” workers in the industry tend to be permanent residents (legal and illegal) in the area with extended families—however, many seasonal, illegal (“freelance”) migrants pass through at the end of the year for work during the harvest. Christmas trees are the “last crop of the season”.
- Communication deficit is manageable but frustrating for both sides
- There is an inherent distrust of anyone asking questions about labor due to: raids by the Department of Labor, several public health research projects in area with a focus on pesticide exposure and ergonomics, bad publicity in newspaper media, and reporters, legal services representatives, and advocacy groups “sneaking” onto farms.
- Majority of growers are not familiar with the formalities of migrant labor laws—especially smaller-scale growers who only use Hispanic labor for short-term jobs. H2A growers are more familiar and more involved with politics/policy of labor issue.
- Most knowledge about Mexican workers and labor policy comes informally—shared among growers
- Larger growers more involved/aware of policy surrounding migrant/alien labor.
- Industry seems to be less “racially-charged” about Hispanic labor issues. One grower explained: “There’s less history between tree growers and migrants. It’s a

more naive industry...not as much deep-seeded prejudice as in some other areas of the state. There is a more inherent respect for workers.”

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

North Carolina shares similar immigrant and minority labor issues with many other states. Other niches and markets within the forest industry actively employ Hispanic labor. Sawmills, logging crews, and solid wood products finishing industries are employing more Hispanic laborers to meet demands in these industries. Future research endeavors will address similar issues within these markets.

This research aims to promote the use of more objective and collaborative analysis of labor issues within the natural resources sector. By including the viewpoints of all participants in an issue, a more comprehensive understanding of an issue can be achieved. Another potential implication for this research is furthering validity for the use of qualitative research methods in assessing broader social impacts within an economic industry—especially in forestry. This type of qualitative research within the forest industry establishes conceptual and theoretical understandings that can provide guidance for future research with other immigrant and minority labor concerns both within North Carolina and other states

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