MIGRANT WORKERS FILL THE GAP ON LOUISIANA FARMS

H-2A visas solves employment dilemma for farmers, immigrants

BY ANNIE OURSO
Special to The Advocate

WHITE CASTLE — Cousins Roberto and Aurelio Nunez came to Louisiana to find what they couldn’t in Mexico: a way to adequately provide for their families.

For up to 10 months each year, the Nunezes and thousands of other Latinos leave home to work on Louisiana farms as documented temporary agricultural workers — H-2A workers, in bureaucratic parlance.

Some 15,000 Latinos have visas for work in Louisiana and at least four times that number in undocumented Latinos, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

Aurelio, 40, has been coming to this farming community for three years, but his home and family are in Mexico City.

“I have three daughters — one in the university, two in high school,” Aurelio said. “It’s money for family. I want my daughters educated.”

Roberto, 32, is from a smaller city in the state of Guanajuato and has been working in Louisiana for eight years. Like his cousin, he also has family counting on him: his widowed mother and two young children.

“It’s better here because in Mexico one person might make $100 in one week of work,” Roberto said. “We make that much money sometimes in one day here.”

The H-2A visa program, administered by the U.S. Citizens and Immigration Services agency of the Department of Homeland Security, allows farmers to hire migrant workers with visas to fill jobs that aren’t being filled by U.S. workers.

“I refer to this as a default U.S. worker program,” said Bryan Breaux, public policy coordinator for the Louisiana Farm Bureau Federation. “The only way to get these workers is by proving you cannot fill positions with U.S. workers. To keep farmers (doing) their jobs, the (government) lets us bring in visa workers.”

Louisiana ranks fifth among the 50 states in H-2A employment with 7,115 certified agricultural workers, according to the U.S. Labor Department’s Office of Foreign Labor Certification. North Carolina, Florida, Georgia and Washington are the top four.

Another 5,147 Latinos come into Louisiana as H-2B temporary nonagricultural workers. More than 2,700 come as H-1B temporary skilled workers, and about 200 have permanent labor certification.

Those 15,000 visa workers are overshadowed by those in the state illegally. The Pew Hispanic Center estimated that in 2010, Louisiana had 65,000 undocumented immigrants living within its borders.

Although there are no updated statistics on illegal population, the Center for Immigration Studies estimated that Louisiana’s entire foreign-born Latino population rose 6 percent since 2010, bringing the total to more than 182,000.

Based on these estimates, more than one-third of the immigrant population in Louisiana is undocumented. The rest have work, travel or student visas, or have become U.S. citizens.

Maria Rosa Eads, director of the Catholic Diocese of Baton Rouge’s Hispanic Apostolate, agrees with the estimated size of the illegal residency. The apostolate provides immigration services...
for the Hispanic community, Eads said, mostly filling out paperwork and petitions to bring family into the U.S.

“‘They are welcomed any way they come (legally or illegally),’ she said. ‘We typically don’t ask because we just want them to help.’

For the Nunezes, the safest way to come is with work visas.

‘It’s better with papers,’ Roberto Nunez said, adding that some immigrants risk their lives trying to cross the border illegally.

‘It’s dangerous,’ echoed Aurelio. ‘If no visa, I’m not coming.’

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement removed 12,693 illegal immigrants from Louisiana in 2013. More than half were convicted criminals, said ICE Public Affairs Officer Bryan Cox.

Roberto and Aurelio both were 10-month H-2A visas to work on a sugar cane farm in White Castle. They arrive in March to cultivate the fields, and in August, they plant sugar cane. From October to the end of December, they help harvest the crop.

After harvesting, the Nunezes can go back home. ‘I like this work, but I don’t like separation of family. On Dec. 28, I’m going home to Mexico.’

Most H-2A agricultural workers are concentrated in south Louisiana, with the greatest number in the Acadiana parishes and along a corridor from Rapides Parish to Houma, said Merrill Hess, foreign labor employment manager for the Louisiana Workforce Commission.

The H-2A program became popular in Louisiana at a time when domestic labor was scarce and farms were shrinking, Breaux said. Migrant workers have kept many Louisiana farms afloat.

According to Breaux, U.S. workers usually do not seek farm jobs because of the nature of the work. Farming tends to be seasonal and laborious without many benefits. Even if farmers raise wages, he said, it’s difficult to find domestic help.

Higher wage rates would shrink a farm’s profit margin, Breaux said. Because the market sets most commodity prices, farmers usually cannot raise prices to compensate for higher wages.

‘Super higher wages might influence more people to work on the farm, but it appears they just don’t want this work,’ Breaux said. ‘If you were offering 12 months of work with retirement and health care, that’s fine. But farmers usually offer only five to eight months of work.’

The state’s largest labor organization, Louisiana AFL-CIO, does not agree. Wage rates could affect domestic workers’ decisions not to pursue farm jobs, said Secretary-Treasurer Julie Cherry.

‘It’s a combination of issues - the level of work, the seasonal nature - but also the wage rates, because oftentimes it’s not viable wages in a place like the U.S.,” Cherry said. “It’s a livable wage where migrant workers come from.

Because most Americans are not familiar with the visa program, Breaux said, H-2A workers are sometimes mistaken for illegal immigrants.

‘People will see Hispanic people in Wal-Mart and different stores and immediately think they’re undocumented, even though they’re here on legal work visa,’ he said. ‘We do it the right way.’

Before USCIS can approve petitions for H-2A workers, employers must file applications with the Department of Labor and cannot fill positions with U.S. workers by placing advertisements in newspapers in a three-state region on two separate days - one on Sunday. They must also contact former employees to request their return.

In Louisiana, employers have to pay H-2A workers a minimum of $9.87 an hour, which is set by the federal government.

“The minimum wage you pay H-2A workers is higher than minimum wage for domestic workers,” Breaux said, “so people don’t bring in visa workers to get cheaper workers.”

Farmers, Bautista and Ramagos agreed the H-2A program is a work visa, “By the time you pay all that, that worker becomes expensive,” Breaux said.

Iberville Parish farmer Cecil Ramagos is a partner in Quad Ag Enterprises, a sugar cane and soybean operation that hires about 50 H-2A migrant workers each year.

Although the H-2A process can be burdensome for farmers, Ramagos said, his farm would likely not survive without these workers.

“The guys are willing to do the work, and they take pride in what they do. They don’t care if it’s running the combine, if it’s burning cane, if it’s planting cane. They do it.”

The only domestic workers are Ramagos’ sons, nephews and a few legal immigrant workers. He said they seldom receive responses to their job advertisements.

“We’ve had some (U.S. workers) come out here. They might stay a couple hours then quit,” Ramagos said. “There’s a lack of available and dependable labor.”

When Quad Ag began hiring H-2A workers in 2005, Vicente Flores Bautista was one of the first employed. He still works with Ramagos today.

“The Ramagos are good people,” Bautista said. “I like working here.”

Bautista, 43, is from the Mexican state of San Luis Potosi and has four children. Like the Nunezes, he came to work in the U.S. to provide for his family.

On the farm, Bautista helps with all jobs, but his specialty is welding, a skill he picked up in Mexico.

“We have a really good group of guys,” Ramagos said. “We know their families, and they know our family. We have Christmas with them, we cook and have them over. We want them to feel like part of our family, too. It’s hard to be away from family.”

Even though leaving home is difficult for migrant workers and the process of getting them to Louisiana is strenuous for farmers, Bautista and Ramagos agreed the H-2A program is worth it.

“I will probably continue coming - depends on Mr. Ceci,” Bautista said, looking at Ramagos with a laugh.

“Oh, it’s no problem,” Ramagos responds. “If Vicente wants to come, he can come.”