



Farm Workers in Mexico's Export-Oriented Agriculture

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The Los Angeles Times published a four-part series December 7-14, 2014 describing forced labor, debt peonage, and poor living conditions of internal Mexican migrants employed on farms that grow produce for US consumers. NGO Polaris suggested that 380,000 people in Mexico could be in forced labor situations, including some in agriculture.

Industry leaders said that these bottom-up reports of worker exploitation were exceptions, not the rule on farms exporting produce to the US. However, there is no top-down data that provide a profile of worker characteristics, wages, and working conditions.

This study fills this void by developing profiles of leading commodities exported from Mexico to the US and the workers employed to produce them. Just as it is hard to determine the health of a population only by visiting emergency rooms, so it is difficult to determine labor conditions only by studying cases of abuse.

This project examines nine supply chains from producers to consumers in five commodities in four areas: tomatoes, bell peppers, and cucumbers in Sinaloa and the Bajío (6 sites), avocados in Michoacán (1 site), and berries in Jalisco and the Bajío (2 sites). We plan to interview 300 workers at each site, collecting data on their demographics, wages and working conditions, and housing and related information. We plan four focus groups in each area, first with 20-25 employers, then a similar number of government agency staff, and NGOs and unions.

The project begins in October 2017 and concludes in October 2019. During the first year, we will prepare the supply chain studies, pilot-test the worker questionnaire, and hold preliminary focus groups. The supply chain studies will be completed by summer 2018, and most of the worker interviews and focus groups done in fall and winter 2018-19.

The goal is to develop a reliable data base on workers employed in Mexico's export-oriented produce industry, to highlight factors associated with better and worse labor conditions, and to suggest employer, worker, and policy changes to reduce risks of worker abuse. We want to work closely with stakeholders to better understand current realities and to ensure that suggested changes are implemented.

We look forward to working with stakeholders, and welcome suggestions. The project is supported by the Walmart Foundation and administered by the Woodrow Wilson Center (www.wilsoncenter.org/mexico)

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