

Supplemental Material

The following subsections provide the information set provided to subgroups of the survey.

Information Set 1 – Field Work and H-2A Visas

Since the 2008 Great Recession, U.S. farmers continually struggle to fill jobs with U.S. domestic workers, particularly in fruit and vegetable production. Therefore, farmers have been turning to H-2A agricultural guest-worker visas to fill temporary or seasonal jobs with foreign laborers, many from Mexico and Central America.

H-2A visas require approval by the U.S. government. Farm employers must show that

- (i) there are not enough domestic workers to fill the positions and
- (ii) hiring H-2A workers will not adversely impact prevailing wages and working conditions of domestic workers.

Once hired, employers must provide guest workers housing and transportation. The U.S. government screens any foreign workers that enter the U.S. with H-2A visas. The H-2A program is complex, and many farmers hire outside consultants to manage the cost and web of regulations. While many employers of H-2A workers follow the laws and regulations, violations do occur. H-2A workers do not know labor laws as well as their domestic counter parts. Thus, H-2A workers are more vulnerable to exploitation, which can range from wage theft to recruiter pay-offs leading to foreign worker debt.

Other problems facing H-2A workers include: no bargaining power, no political representation, no job security, a lack of career path, and a lack of flexibility.

Information Set 2 – Impact of COVID-19 on Field Workers

Following the first confirmed case of COVID-19 on January 20, 2020, the new coronavirus rapidly spread throughout the United States. By the start of April 2020, 45 US states have ordered

“shelter in place” orders to slow the spread, allowing only essential travel. Infectious disease experts predict that COVID-19 will cause between 100,000 and 240,000 deaths within the United States alone.

The high infection rate and rapid transmission have stressed the food supply chain (agricultural producers, food distribution, and grocery stores) as consumers are stockpiling food. Agricultural workers are also at high risk of contracting coronavirus because remaining at least six feet apart is not possible in many cases. If there is an outbreak among agricultural workers, the US food supply chain could be harmed since an adequate supply of agricultural workers is key to the production and steady supply of labor-intensive agricultural products.

Consequently, the federal government has deemed agricultural workers as essential, exempting them from shelter-in-place orders. Furthermore, while the US Department of State has formally suspended routine visa services, they continue to process H-2 visas and have temporarily waived the in-person interview requirement because the “H-2 program is essential to the economy and food security.

