

# The New York Review of Books

## Farmworker Anxieties

**Don Villarejo, reply by Michael Greenberg**  
FEBRUARY 21, 2019 ISSUE

**In response to:**

*In the Valley of Fear* from the December 20, 2018 issue

*To the Editors:*

Michael Greenberg’s essay “In the Valley of Fear” [*NYR*, December 6, 2018] captures the overwhelming sense of anxiety among many farm laborer families in California. Daily life among family members, whether traveling to work or to school, shopping, or just visiting friends, places them at risk of sudden arrest and possible deportation at the hands of federal ICE agents. In relating Rufina Garcia’s story and visiting her late parents’ shrine, Greenberg correctly focuses on the indigenous immigrants’ plight: agriculture’s reliance on low-wage immigrant labor vs. a society that has become increasingly antagonistic to the millions of hard-working families who lack authorization for US employment.



*Matt Black/Magnum Photos*

*Farm laborers on their way to work, Fresno, California, 2004*

At the same time, Greenberg inaccurately portrays recent trends in California agricultural production, and in the state’s farm labor market. While he suggests that San Joaquin Valley table grape vineyards have been pulled out owing to a shortage of labor, he appears unaware of the latest production data. The California Table Grape Commission announced that the industry set a new all-time high record of production during its 2018 peak harvest season, shipping 55 million cartons of fresh table grapes. Nearly all were hand-picked by foreign-born farm laborers.

Some sectors of California agriculture have fared badly in recent years. Production and/or prices have declined for cotton, sugar beets, and some other field crops, as well as dairy.

New almond and pistachio orchards replaced some croplands. But many components of the fresh produce sector have thrived. Every year, the state's farms yield ever more key fresh produce crops: more berries, more leafy greens, more table grapes, and more mandarin oranges, among other commodities. Despite a record five-year drought, wildfires, and untimely freezes, segments of the fresh produce sector have expanded.

Labor demand in California agriculture is greatest for these fresh produce crops while most field crops rely heavily on mechanized planting and harvesting. Nonetheless, during the decade 2008 through 2017, the statewide annual average of monthly employment in agriculture increased from 389,767 to 418,258, a growth of 7.3 percent. The greatest increases were for fresh produce crops.

What has changed in the farm labor market during the past several years is that fewer domestic workers—residents of the US, regardless of employment authorization status—seek jobs in agriculture. How could employment have increased?

The new source of farm laborers is the existing “guest worker” program, formally known as the “non-immigrant, temporary foreign agricultural worker” program, aka H-2A, its visa category. The most recent report finds the number of H-2A visas certified for US employment during fiscal year 2018 was 242,762, up by 21 percent over the 2017 figure. In California alone, year-on-year, the number of H-2A visas certified increased by nearly 40 percent. Representative Bob Goodlatte's failed proposal to weaken the H-2A visa program had minimal support in the House and Senate.

California agriculture has led the nation for decades in annual production value. Farmers know their industry is reliant on foreign-born labor. Californians favor comprehensive immigration reform instead of policies that intentionally divide families and punish many who work hard in our state's fields.

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**Michael Greenberg *replies*:**

I appreciate that Don Villarejo acknowledges the accuracy of my portrayal of the plight of undocumented farmworkers and their families in California, and I admire the research that the California Institute for Rural Studies has conducted on the dangers of heatstroke, pesticide exposure, and food insecurity faced by farmworkers. But I fear that he has misread my discussion of labor shortages in relation to the economic value of California's agricultural production. Revenues are higher than ever, as I report—\$50.13 billion in 2017, according to the latest figures from California's Department of Food and Agriculture,

almost double that of any other state. No one doubts that this is because of the high value of the state's fruit and vegetable crops that travel straight from the fields, without processing in most cases, to America's supermarkets and grocery stores.

The 7.3 percent increase in the number of farmworkers over the past ten years that Mr. Villarejo cites is pretty modest in light of the fact that California's farm revenues rose more than 30 percent between 2010 and 2017. In 2017, grape production decreased by 4 percent yet grape revenues increased by 3.1 percent, because the price went up by \$62 per ton. Surely this price increase, along with favorable weather conditions after the end of a recent drought, contributed to the strong table grape harvest of 2018.

Yes, these grapes were picked by undocumented workers, but that doesn't change the fact that all along California's agricultural valleys, growers are anxious about labor shortages as they compete for the same finite—and shrinking—pool of workers. Wine vineyards, where the highest-value grapes are grown, are employing machines instead of farmworkers to strip grape clusters and leaves, even though the machines sometimes damage the vines. And fruit growers have been planting more and more almond groves, which require less labor, despite the fact that almonds consume large amounts of expensive water. Every grower I spoke to or saw quoted in the local press was worried about the precarious supply of labor. John D'Arrigo of D'Arrigo Brothers, the giant lettuce and broccoli producer in the Salinas Valley, admitted that he was losing millions of dollars a year from crops that have been plowed under because of a persistent shortage of workers.

With undocumented domestic workers under intense pressure from ICE, it is no surprise that more guest workers are being contracted to work in California's fields. But guest workers are not the answer: H-2A visas are subject to changes that can weaken guest workers' rights and undermine the wages of workers who live here. And most growers prefer a steady local workforce with ongoing knowledge of the vicissitudes of particular crops and climates.

These are relatively minor differences when compared to the important issue that Mr. Villarejo and I wholeheartedly agree upon: comprehensive immigration reform that would give undocumented workers the right to live and raise their families without fear of sudden deportation.

