

SOME COLORADO FARM LABOR PROBLEMS IN 1944

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In round numbers there will be roughly one hundred thousand farm jobs to be filled during the coming season. I mean by this that most of Colorado's 56,000 farm and ranch operators will ask some one "where can I get a man or a crew" at least that number of times. They will need to get definite answers in the form of workers about one hundred thousand times because of peak seasonable jobs that require extra help and because of the prevalent inclination of workers to refuse to stay put or return to the same job after a lay-off.

I am going to discuss these problems from a state-wide and over-all point of view and not from the point of view of any particular group of producers. In doing this, I am considering the state as a pool filled to a certain extent with a potential labor supply but lacking much of the total quantity needed. This labor pool is fluid and any additions to or subtractions from it may eventually affect all parts of it to some degree. I say, may affect, because this pool is not as fluid as water, for instance, but it is nevertheless fluid to a very considerable extent in these times of keen competition for workers. In many respects this pool must be kept as fluid as possible to the end that the maximum use can be made of all manpower available in it. In other respects, it must be kept more or less rigid to prevent the draining away of labor from areas or jobs less preferred by workers to those more preferred by them. In peace times this was not so necessary or desirable because variations in the flow of key agricultural commodities was not as important as it is today. It is highly essential in this emergency that production of essential farm crops be balanced as nearly as possible to certain definite and fixed needs. All agricultural areas in Colorado are producing essential commodities of one kind or another. All areas have lost essential workers to about the same extent. In fairness to all who produce to meet this emergency the labor supply must be divided as equitably as possible between all such producers. A surplus of workers in any area of the state cannot be tolerated as long as any other area is deficient.

Colorado is normally a deficiency area with respect to hand workers. This deficiency has developed simultaneously with the beet sugar and canning industries. It has become firmly rooted and fixed in the last forty years.

There are many well known factors involved in the development of this deficiency which contribute to the present situation. Some of the most important of these factors are:

1. A large acreage of crops with heavy man-hour requirements in areas with low labor populations.

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2. A shortage of winter time industries in these areas to hold workers on a year-round basis.
3. The disinclination of workers to seek or want steady employment if it can be avoided.
4. Changing standards of farm income and economic conditions.
5. Numerous political, sociological, and racial problems.
6. And to these the war has added another by causing the moving in of crops with high labor requirements to areas that formerly produced crops with low labor demands.

The aggregate of these and other factors presents an extremely complicated over-all situation even in normal times. Conditions engendered by the present emergency and following so closely the drouth and depression of the 1930's complicates the situation still further. This is particularly true in the matter of housing. During most of the 1930's field workers left farm housing and moved to town to be near W.P.A. jobs. Relief and W.P.A. work had the effect of reducing some workers willingness to earn their pay. Those that did find or accept farm work preferred to drive out from town. Labor housing on farms was put to use as storage space or left to deteriorate. As the war emergency developed, material and labor shortages restricted or prevented the construction of new housing and the repairing of old buildings. Farm incomes also prevented much repairing and construction that otherwise could have been done.

Since the beginning of Selective Service and recruitment of labor for war industry, rural areas in Colorado have lost about 35% of their effective labor supply, or about 47,600 workers. This includes farmers, members of farm families, hired labor and residents of towns and villages of 2500 or less population, who worked on farms or in local processing and packing jobs. The total loss by this time may be much more than 35% because recruitment has gone on all winter. A promise has been made or indicated that these workers will be returned when spring work begins. That however, remains to be seen. Continuous advertising for workers has not helped the manpower situation in my opinion. We see daily local ads for workers on the west coast. Hand bills circulating on the west coast request men for jobs in Wyoming and Colorado. Many workers are simply seeing the country at employers and the government's expense. This is keeping the labor pool entirely too fluid for practical purposes. High prevailing wages have encouraged workers to lay off or to refuse to take any but the most convenient and desirable jobs.

The loss of rural workers has not made a proportionate amount of housing available because many families have remained. The space formerly occupied by those who left cannot be made

available to other workers who may be brought in. Therefore, one of our labor problems is a shortage of housing which exists in almost every agricultural community. After pressing into service all available housing and supplementing that with such tents and camp equipment as could be secured from various sources, including the army, there was still much to be desired in both quantity and quality in 1943. This housing shortage affects both hand workers and monthly employees.

There have been numerous requests by local groups for Federal housing projects. Some eight or ten such projects in the state would be of considerable help at this time. However, there are some serious questions that might be raised about such projects as permanent institutions in the future. Will they be more desirable than the on-the-farm family units? May they produce greater racial, sociological and political problems in the future? Should the government provide permanent housing for part-time farm workers or should producer groups and processors and shippers provide housing for the labor they use? These are questions that must eventually be answered. For the present they must be answered on a temporary basis to meet the emergency as effectively as possible.

The 47,600 workers lost to the rural districts of Colorado represents a large part of the more experienced and active workers that were available for food production. These workers cannot be replaced in quality from neighboring states because all states have suffered similar losses. Most of the states from which workers may be brought in to Colorado do not have people experienced in irrigation farming or mountain livestock production.

To make up for this loss of experienced workers farmers and their families have increased their hours of work to an average of over twelve hours per day. They have promoted, you might say, the better hand laborers to teamsters, tractor operators, irrigators, and other skilled jobs.

The deficiency of experienced workers is much more serious than the deficiency of gang labor such as beet thinners and vegetable pickers. After listening to several farmers and ranchers discuss their labor problems this winter, I am convinced that the real fear in many of their minds is not the supply of beet thinners that will be available in 1944. They have confidence that public and private agencies can supply them. Most of them are worried about help to prepare seed beds, plant, cultivate, irrigate, care for livestock, and do those jobs that cannot be constantly supervised.

Farmers are keenly interested in mechanization of farm tasks. Much has been done in that direction, much is being done now, and there is much more that will eventually be done. Nevertheless, the problem of finding a competent operator for this new equipment is causing farmers to hesitate and weigh seriously whether to plant row crops or grain crops.

The State Extension Services are being urged by Washington to train town and city people for skilled farm jobs. Some such training is practicable and some is not. There is not time to train general all-round farm workers. Too many skills are involved and there is too much variation in the techniques used on different farms. Few people so trained can be depended upon to stay on the job after they are trained. The best that we can hope to accomplish is to give the worker from town some farm orientation and the farm employer some assistance in training his inexperienced employee on the job.

The farmer is frequently more difficult to assist than the town boy is to train because the farmer has never before been confronted with so great a necessity to train his help. He has generally been able to hire workers with some experience. Farmers have little time in the busy season to devote to training and, never having had to train hired workers, many farmers do not know how to do a good job of it.

There is little doubt about obtaining an adequate supply of hand workers for 1944 such as beet thinners for example. Recruitment, transportation, housing and utilization of them present a multitude of problems that will have to be met. Close cooperation between the United States Department of Agriculture, the War Food Administration, the Extension Service, processors and farmers can solve these problems.

After the workers arrive on the farm the farmer will have some problems that he will have to work out alone. The first difficulty in many instances will be language. A friendly attitude and demonstrations of how to do the job will take the place of hours of telling the worker how it should be done. Some farm operators seem to expect these imported workers to know as much about the techniques of the job as they know themselves. In these times when so much inexperienced help must be used, farmers, field men, county agents and all others that have a responsibility in the utilization of labor must take extra precautions in planning for and supervising inexperienced workers.

In 1943 the Colorado Extension Service was instrumental in putting nearly 3,000 high school age youth into the fields. Fortune smiled on everyone involved in the use of these youth. Not a single serious accident was reported. This was more luck than good management. Greater precaution must be taken in 1944, to prevent accidents, see that proper working conditions are maintained, fair wages are paid promptly, and loss of time is eliminated in so far as possible.

Since many town and city youth are capable of contributing materially to food production we must first find all those available and willing to take farm jobs. We must get their parents and guardians approval. Then we must sort the prospects for proper placement according to their and their families wishes,

their capabilities, and experience in the light of the opening available. With the present rate of enlistments of 17 year-old boys, the prospects in this field look slim for material to train for summer work.

There are problems and details of grouping 14 to 17 year old youth for gang work and organization, transportation and supervision all of which can and should be greatly improved over last year. More cooperation by farmers and processors is needed to prevent losses of time and the necessity for re-recruitment between jobs, so that maximum efficiency can be approached. Farmers can cooperate to improve the situation by ordering only as many workers as they intend to hire, by keeping labor centers informed as to the progress of the work, and when labor will be released so that commitments can be made to other farmers. Field men of processors generally did fine work in rendering such assistance last year. Their efforts should be increased and improved in 1944.

There is considerable hesitancy on the part of some farm people in the hiring of certain groups of workers available for hand work. It is true that Mexican Nationals and prisoners of war do not fit well into some types and sizes of farm and ranch operations. Generally speaking, there is little difficulty with the Mexican Nationals. Most of those that did occur were misunderstandings that could have been avoided.

In the case of prisoners of war the situation is more complicated. They must be kept under guard by the army. This necessitates using larger crews than many farmers like to have. Transportation and housing presents difficult problems. They will have to be used where conditions can satisfactorily be met. This may require some shifting of free workers to new areas in some instances. Such shifting should not be done if it can be avoided, but we most certainly are confronted with the necessity for some careful planning to prevent sending free workers into localities where prisoners of war can effectively be used.

A feeling still exists in some localities against the use of war prisoners. It should be overcome. There is little or no foundation for it when the difficulties incident to their use can be resolved. Our boys now in prison camps in Europe prefer to do some work in fields in preference to close confinement behind barbed wire. Some of our army officers say that we are buying more democracy with the money spent on prisoners than we are with any other money we are spending.

In any case, we are spending the money and we need the work prisoners can perform. Any good we can get out of them is clear national gain. If we can gain anything in addition that will be of benefit in a more lasting peace we should encourage farmers to forget their personal prejudices and make use of these prisoners when they need them and when the cost of their use is not out of line with the losses they may suffer by not using them.