



**Workers in Mexico’s Export Agriculture:  
From Research to Action  
Agreements and Recommendations**

Wilson Center Task Force on Mexican Farm Workers in North America’s Agriculture  
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This document summarizes the agreements and recommendations reached by the project’s Task Force via multiple exchanges, work with governments and organizations, and site visits taking place in the U.S. and in Mexico from March, 2023 to January, 2025. The goal was to agree on a road map consisting of realistic, detailed agreements and recommendations that can significantly improve recruitment and working conditions in the Mexican agricultural sector. There is a challenging road ahead. Nevertheless, consensus regarding the actions concerned is critical for success.

This summary’s purpose is to serve as a road map for future engagement of the Wilson Center’s Task Force on Mexican Farm Workers in North American agriculture. Approval of this document at the Wilson’s Center final meeting of the Task Force on December 9, 2024 signifies that the Task Force is in general agreement with it. However, it is subject to modification in the future. This document is an abridged version of a detailed, technical document explaining how each agreement or recommendation can be successfully implemented.

There is a single population group working in Mexico’s and U.S. agriculture. This group includes highly mobile individuals, for example, in the H-2A program in the United States. Nevertheless, there is a need to diminish emigration from Mexico. Promoting ethical recruitment and better working conditions of employment in Mexican agriculture will lead to a better quality of life in general for the workers. This, in turn, should promote long-term settlement of the workers in Mexico, and lower emigration pressures, particularly less pressure to migrate using irregular channels. Thus, in addition to the benefits for the workers themselves, improvements in Mexican jobs will also favor an improved climate for bilateral dialogue.

Mexico’s incoming government is developing a comprehensive strategy for farm workers. Details of this strategy and its implementation will be extremely valuable to the Task Force, which is willing to work with the Mexican government to the extent that it improves recruitment, employment, and workers’ quality of life. Dialogue with the secretariat of labor and with the secretariat of agriculture will be very valuable to ensure wide coverage and effective access to its benefits.

## Current status and prospects

- Waged agricultural employment is growing, and there is growing integration of North American supply and production chains.
- Mexico's export agricultural sector witnessed rapid growth in formal farm employment, and in workers' real incomes.
- Mexico's export agriculture has fostered a tighter labor market providing better conditions for workers leading to the reduction in poverty levels in both export regions and workers' hometowns in Mexico's South.
- Recently, the once-rapid growth of decent employment conditions for farm workers in Mexico has slowed down. Several of the following agreements and recommendations are aimed at recovering this lost impetus.
- Wages, on the other hand, continue to grow in real terms, with export municipalities and states leading the way.
- Export municipalities nevertheless exhibit significant deficiencies in their infrastructure and in social services offered to farm workers and their families.
- Alliances must be formed between local and state governments and various industry stakeholders to improve infrastructure and services (basic urban services, childcare, day care, health clinics, to name a few).
- In order to counteract pressures leading to labor informality, specific and timely actions must be undertaken. Formality must grow in order to reduce worker poverty. In order to achieve this, formality must provide tangible benefits to workers and their families.
- Incentives and training are urgently required in order to increase job formality. Buyers and exporters must demand certifications guaranteeing compliance with labor laws. Access to certifications must be facilitated to compliant employers.
- A comprehensive approach to gender equality and freedom from violence must be adopted by all employers.
- These improvements must be implemented at scale over the next two years.

## A call to action

The following agreements and recommendations all deal with conditions in Mexico, and with Mexico's specific institutional framework. The only one relating to a U.S. program deals with ethical recruitment for the H-2A program, because recruitment takes place in Mexico.

Recommendations and agreements follow a sequence. The first two refer to "ground zero" of labor conditions, i.e., recruitment, basic information for workers, and continuity in employment. The second group (3, 4, and 5) refer to ensuring effective services for formal workers and their families. Effective service delivery is essential to incentivize workers to prefer formal jobs. The final group (6, 7 and 8) addresses general improvements in the export agricultural sector as a whole.

Recommendations 1 and 2 are aimed at improving recruitment for jobs in Mexico and in the United States, worker education and security, and income stability for migrant workers.

### **1. Ethical recruitment protocols for jobs in Mexico, and a system providing employment security**

Mexican commercial agriculture depends on migrant workers from Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero, other states in Mexico's South, as well as foreign workers. We have experienced the following problems:

- Workers lacking adequate personal documents are unable to access formal agricultural jobs.

- Many, if not most, workers, lack knowledge of their labor rights, and the procedures to access services (paid sick leave, housing savings funds, etc.) they are entitled to.
- Regarding the security of migrant workers and their families during recruitment, and the trip from Mexico's South to export areas.
- Regarding the continuity of employment during their movement along the various high seasons in Mexico's west and north.

The first two bullets derive from lack of information and workers' inability to access, or benefit from, formal jobs. Jornamex and other Walmart grantees have developed tools to enable workers to obtain documents and to access benefits and services. Nevertheless, information for the workers and adequate oversight at point of recruitment should be more widely implemented.

Mexico's National Migration Institute (INM)<sup>1</sup> is in charge of verifying that persons traveling on Mexican roads are Mexican or that they possess immigration documents. But, when inspectors board a bus transporting workers, they select those they consider likely to be foreign, get them off the bus, and detain them. Workers have complained of mistreatment, or the forfeit of their identity documents.

In terms of job permanence and stability, it is important to note that agricultural work has been characterized by intermittent hiring. This is due to the fluctuation in labor demand depending on the cycle of each agricultural product. However, these forms of employment increase the labor and social precariousness in which agricultural workers find themselves, as they do not guarantee job stability, and consequently, permanent access to job benefits and social rights.

In light of the above we recommend the following:

- Strengthening campaigns to inform workers what are the procedures to obtain and renew the documents needed for formal employment.
- Carrying out workshops with workers already employed in formal farms, aimed at enabling them to access the benefits they are entitled to (sick leave, maternity leave, housing savings funds, etc.).
- Informing workers of the 800 numbers and the actions each major Mexican authority is obliged to undertake in order to respect migrant workers' rights at each stage of the hiring and transport processes.
- That INM design and operate secure migration protocols aimed at eradicating discrimination, human rights abuses, violence and profiling. INM is involved even when Mexican workers are departing a Mexican state in the South.
- The protocol should include 1) the provision of legal Mexican (national or immigration) identity documents to traveling workers; 2) safe passage guarantees to workers in possession of such documents; and 3) sanctions to officers detaining workers illegally.
- That the National Employment Service (SNE)<sup>2</sup> design an information sharing exchange allowing legal recruiters to move their workers among work sites, so that workers can enjoy continuous employment for the duration of the high season in Mexico's export areas.

## **2. Safe recruitment for H-2A workers**

During 2024, the U.S. government's H-2A program will coordinate the temporary migration of close to 400,000 workers. This program provides substantial benefits to these workers and their families. However, we find there are very significant problems with recruitment. The main problem is that there are a large number of impostors posing as recruiters. They collect "advance fees" from workers and then

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<sup>1</sup> Instituto Nacional de Migración.

<sup>2</sup> Servicio Nacional de Empleo.

disappear. In some cases, they transport workers to perform forced labor on illegal drug farms and laboratories.

It is necessary to improve the information available to Mexican workers through legitimate information and hiring channels, as well as the widespread promotion of the 800 numbers, to ensure that those who present themselves as recruiters are indeed legitimate. Telephone service hours should be appropriate for farm workers, and answering menus should be easy to navigate and extremely clear. Both governments already operate hotlines, but we believe they could improve. IREX Ambulantes and Periplo, the group of organizations focusing on recruitment, also do. Furthering the reach of these two organizations among migrant workers in Southern Mexico would permit substantial progress in this regard.

Recommendations 3, 4 and 5 are aimed at expanding and improving job benefits and the quality of life of farm worker families:

### **3. An expanded and improved network of child and health care services through municipal governments (Branch 33 of the federal budget)**

Workers' households in export areas experience inadequate conditions due to many factors. Two significant ones have to do with the absence of quality child care, medical care, and urban services (water, sewerage, paved streets, street lighting and electricity, waste collection services). Quality child care can dramatically improve households' income, as it frees an able household member for paid work, and improves a child's development. Urban services diminish the domestic workload on women, improve security, and ensure a better life and health for themselves and their families.

Mexico's *Ramo 33* is part of the federal budget. It allocates approximately 30% of the federal budget to states and municipalities. It is comprised of eight funds, each allocated to a specific need (education, public safety, health, etc.). One of these funds is intended for social infrastructure. The fund is allocated on several principles, one of which is poverty levels. Because they belong to relatively well-off states, however, settlements receiving relatively large shares of farm workers have little access to funds addressing the needs of these new arrivals.<sup>3</sup> *Ramo 33* includes four funds that can address these deficiencies. Our group intends to work with crucial stakeholders in agriculture, the Secretariat for Well-Being, the Institute for the Technical Development of Revenue Systems (INDETEC)<sup>4</sup>, and state and municipal governments, to improve and expand infrastructure and services in these municipalities. On the one hand, use of these funds can greatly expand child care services in these municipalities. On the other hand, it can foster the expansion of urban services, and effective access to them by the farm worker population. Procedures are long and complex. Jornamex intends to begin working with INDETEC in Jalisco to pilot this initiative. Please refer to our extended version for details concerning channeling these resources to social infrastructure.

Workers' well-being is at the core of our project's goals. Reports of the extremely inadequate transport and living conditions in 2014 by Los Angeles Times set off a major international drive to either ban some Mexican imports into the U.S., or to improve these conditions. In order to enhance the impact of these funds on the quality of life of farm workers and their families, we believe the secretariats of the revenue (SHCP)<sup>5</sup> and of well-being (SEBIEN)<sup>6</sup> could facilitate access by these municipalities to these funds, prioritizing the specific areas where farm workers have settled.

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<sup>3</sup> Funds are allocated on the basis of prior distributions, poverty, lack of urban services, and marginality.

<sup>4</sup> Instituto para el Desarrollo Técnico de las Haciendas Públicas.

<sup>5</sup> Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público.

<sup>6</sup> Secretaría del Bienestar.

#### **4. Effective access to IMSS and INFONAVIT benefits and services**

Export agriculture pays approximately 27 billion pesos annually in fees to the Mexican Institute of Social Security (IMSS)<sup>7</sup> and the Workers' Housing Fund Institute (INFONAVIT)<sup>8</sup>, but its workers benefit very little from their services and mortgage loans. Absence of these services affect workers' income, because they are forced to incur in expenses that could be avoided, and their well-being, since often they do without these services at all. Mechanisms must be implemented to allow effective access to them. Our group is working with IMSS and with growers and associations in order to enlarge the coverage of IMSS child care facilities. This will improve the living standards of workers and their families.

INFONAVIT: Workers must have easy access to their housing saving funds, and to housing loans. They have very little access because INFONAVIT argues it loses contact with farm workers moving from one job to the next. Nevertheless, there are successful examples of housing developments for farm workers. They must be scaled to benefit many times more workers. Access to them will incentivize workers to seek formal jobs, to stay in Mexico, and to commit to a career in Mexican agriculture.

A very specific request to the Mexican government concerns the government's implementation of the construction of one million houses for low-income Mexican workers. Given that farm workers are among Mexico's poorest workers, it is highly desirable that a substantial portion of these houses be allocated to farm workers in Mexico. In addition to the improvement in their assets and quality of life, this will further incentivize permanence of these workers in Mexico.

#### **5. A study of the allocation of federal cash transfer programs on farm workers and their families**

Federal cash transfer programs should mostly benefit poor families. But farm worker families receive smaller federal cash transfer amounts than land-holding families<sup>9</sup>. Current survey sample sizes do not allow a fine breakdown of farm workers' level of access to these programs. A survey with sufficient sample size can be implemented via an agreement among the International Horticultural Alliance for the Promotion of Social Responsibility (AHIFORES)<sup>10</sup>, the Mexican Association of Protected Horticulture A.C. (AMHPAC)<sup>11</sup> and the National Institute for Geographical and Statistical Information (INEGI)<sup>12</sup>. This survey will allow fine-tuning cash transfer programs to farm worker families.

The final group of recommendations is aimed at the general context of agricultural employment, and agricultural employment in export agriculture:

#### **6. A level playing field**

Growers, associations, labor unions, and organizations convened by the Wilson Center and CIESAS consider that formalization and decent wages must be sought for agriculture as a whole, and not just for export agriculture. Division among two sectors ("export" and "domestic") is harmful for the workers and for law-abiding employers. Mexico's labor secretariat (STPS), and its revenue secretariat (SHCP), must implement efficient mechanisms ensuring large growers and buyers, regardless of their market orientation, are unable to profit from child, forced, and informal labor. We propose these secretariats implement training mechanisms, initially, and adequate sanctions, if necessary, against employers profiting from breaking labor laws and abusing workers during recruitment, transport to export areas, and employment, regardless of their declared market orientation.

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<sup>7</sup> Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social.

<sup>8</sup> Instituto del Fondo Nacional de la Vivienda para los Trabajadores.

<sup>9</sup> Jornamex (2024) Agricultural Labor Market Report # 3.

<sup>10</sup> Alianza Hortifrutícola Internacional para el Fomento de la Responsabilidad Social A. C.

<sup>11</sup> Asociación Mexicana de Horticultura Protegida A.C.

<sup>12</sup> Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía.

It is also highly necessary to recognize law-abiding, ethical employers by means of market incentives and a lowering of their costs involved in auditing and certification. The labor secretariat's Voluntary Labor Verification system (VELAVO)<sup>13</sup> is a good start. Nevertheless, some employers affiliated to it feel that the system has been used to target them, rather than enabling them to enact improvements.

Buyers in the United States and Europe should increase their attention to compliance with labor standards, and reward compliant employers with significant market incentives. This change must be implemented gradually. Since USMCA is due for renegotiation by mid-2026, it is advisable to begin implementation of these improvements before that date.

Mexico's Labor Secretariat has offered to maintain a dialogue with Jornamex and with this Task Force. This dialogue will be welcome. The secretariat proposes that its General Federal Directorate for Labor Inspection (DGIFT by its Spanish acronym<sup>14</sup>) be incorporated to promote the formalization of labor contracts in Mexico's agriculture, and that the same directorate be involved through its labor advisers to strengthen employers' compliance with the law.

## **7. An industry agreement incentivizing compliance**

We are at a critical juncture for the future of Mexico – United States trade in agriculture and many other sectors. It would be desirable to show, at the negotiating table, that Mexican exporters, and U.S. and Canadian retailers, possess a system that maintains and strengthens the drive to better ethical recruitment and employment practices in Mexico, in particular those dealing with forced labor, child labor and labor relations. These improvements should diminish the need to migrate.

We acknowledge and respect current retailer, supplier and grower agreements to move forward with systems encouraging full compliance with existing laws and with ethical standards for recruitment and labor relations. Some of these systems are expanding to include the largest and most relevant growers and exporters in Mexico.

Jornamex and this Task Force will monitor progress with these industry-based systems and report advances as we continue to engage with Mexican growers and social responsibility associations such as AHIFORES and AMHPAC.

Mexico's Labor Secretariat also proposes that employers sign up to the System for the Accreditation of Good and Decent Labor Practices<sup>15</sup> to foster better compliance with Mexico's labor law. This system should also foster improvements in compliance with the law and in ethical standards.

## **8. Strengthening labor democracy**

Mexico has moved towards labor democracy. This process has its origins in the period from 2017 to 2019, when the Constitution and the Labor Law were reformed. These changes respond to Mexico's priorities and to the commitments acquired by Mexico in chapter 23 of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). The democratization of union representation should impact the working conditions of farm workers and, thereby, improve their quality of life.

Union representation is crucial to safeguarding workers' labor rights. These rights offer a framework that includes: a) Freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining; b) The elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labor; c) The effective abolition of child labor, the prohibition of the worst forms of child labor and other labor protections for children and minors; d) The elimination of discrimination in employment and occupation; and, e) Acceptable working conditions regarding minimum wages, working hours, and occupational health and safety.

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<sup>13</sup> Programa de Verificación Laboral Voluntaria (Voluntary Labor Verification Program).

<sup>14</sup> Dirección General de la Inspección Federal del Trabajo.

<sup>15</sup> Sistema de Acreditación de Trabajo Decente y Buenas Prácticas Laborales.

We recognize the progress achieved to date and we recommend accelerating, expanding and strengthening union democracy and the celebration of collective contracts in order to guarantee decent working conditions within a legal framework that safeguards the labor rights and freedoms of workers. Thus, we recommend that the Ministry of Labor and Social Security (STPS), together with agricultural and agroindustrial councils and representatives of the main unions in the agricultural sector in Mexico, establish a working group to analyze the current state of union representation in Mexico. Once the diagnosis is made, the main challenges identified must be addressed. Finally, we recommend a communication campaign to inform workers and employers of the advantages of union representation and its democratization. This campaign should be developed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, and Jornamex is happy to contribute with our own education campaigns, with the support of public universities.

### **Providing follow-up to agreements and recommendations**

Jornamex will be directly involved in the implementation of recommendations 3, 4, 5 and 6. Our team will partner with INDETEC to enable municipal governments to access federal funds in *Ramo 33* and to invest them in social infrastructure in specific urban areas where immigrant workers are settling. Secondly, we have developed a working relationship with the childcare division at IMSS and DIF and will work with growers and associations to increase the provision of childcare to farm worker families. Finally, our team's experience with social programs will allow us to work with SEBIEN to explore the reasons why farm worker households benefit from federal cash transfer programs to a much lesser extent than land-owning households, and to devise mechanisms to increase effective access to them.

We intend, however, to monitor implementation of all recommendations, and to bring all relevant actors together when necessary.

Other recommendations should be taken up by governments, other social organizations, or other Task Force members. Jornamex, however, will work with them and with the Task Force to ensure their implementation.

