

Canada's guest worker program could become model for U.S. immigration changes

By [Nick Miroff](#), Published: January 5

OJOCALIENTE, Mexico — When Oscar Reyes heads north for seasonal work every spring, he no longer pays a smuggler to sneak him through the desert past the U.S. Border Patrol.

He takes Air Canada.

Reyes earns \$10.25 an hour tending grapes and spraying pesticides at a vineyard in British Columbia's Okanagan Valley, working eight months straight, seven days a week.

He was one of nearly 16,000 temporary workers from Mexico imported by Canada last year, part of a government-to-government agreement that Mexican officials view as a potential model for an expanded "guest worker" program in the United States.

"I come home loaded with money, and I don't have to worry about anything," said Reyes, who is back home for the winter with his family. New toys were scattered across the living room.

With President Obama's reelection in November, and the overwhelming support he received from Hispanic voters, expectations are high that he will take up the nettlesome cause of U.S. immigration reform in his second term.

If so, the most contentious issue is likely to be the fate of the 11 million or so illegal immigrants living in the United States. But the debate is also expected to include proposals for a massive expansion of temporary worker programs to meet future U.S. demand for legal, [low-skilled labor](#).

The United States gives out about [50,000 seasonal agricultural visas](#) per year, nearly all of them to Mexican workers. But U.S. farmers, immigrant advocate groups, labor unions and Mexican officials say that the current U.S. program is a mess: inefficient, bureaucratic and vulnerable to abuses by swindlers and shady recruiters who charge potential workers thousands of dollars to find jobs for them and prepare their visa applications.

The frustrations have left many [looking north](#), to Canada, where government officials partner with their Mexican counterparts to recruit workers, expedite visas, guarantee health and safety standards, and coordinate travel arrangements and pay.

They also go to extraordinary lengths to make sure the workers go back to Mexico at the end of the season, raising criticisms that the arrangement treats them as little more than human machines.

Mexico's new [president, Enrique Peña Nieto](#), said that he has told Obama that his administration is keen to "contribute" to a push for U.S. immigration reform.

Such talk would have been too politically sensitive just six years ago, when the volume of Mexican migrants crossing the border was seen as out of control and the U.S. Border Patrol was making more than a million arrests a year.

Last year, the Border Patrol made just 340,000 apprehensions, the lowest level since 1971, a result of a tighter U.S. job market, stiffer U.S. enforcement and widespread fears in Mexico of the kidnapping crews and drug gangs who roam the borderlands.

Overall, nearly as many Mexicans [are now leaving the United States](#), whether voluntarily or as deportees, as the number who arrive, a trend that has raised alarms of labor shortages in industries such as food service and farming that are historically dependent on low-paid migrants.

“For anybody who believes that there will be a wild and endless flow of [Mexican migrants] into the future, that’s just not realistic,” said Craig Regelbrugge, vice president for government relations at the American Nursery and Landscape Association, a trade group.

According to industry estimates, U.S. farms hire more than 2 million workers each year, at least half of whom are thought to be in the country illegally.

Farm laborers already tend to earn minimum wage or more, experts say, so employers wouldn’t necessarily have to pay higher wages to guest workers than what they currently pay illegal migrants.

Still, some U.S. farmers and other employers fear that if the illegal workforce is granted legal status or “amnestied,” many of those workers will seek jobs in less-arduous occupations.

Between 1942 and 1964, U.S. “bracero” programs issued 4.5 million visas to Mexican guest workers, and today some of the same U.S. labor unions that pushed to have the programs eliminated support bringing in more guest workers.

“We don’t want to see domestic workers displaced, but we also recognize the legitimate needs that U.S. growers have,” said Erik Nicholson, a national vice president of the United Farm Workers, which wants to unionize the Mexican laborers even before they arrive in the United States.

In turn, many growers now back the unions’ insistence that temporary workers have the freedom to change employers, instead of tying their immigration status to a single job.

Under the U.S. program for seasonal agriculture workers, there is no cap on the number of visas that can be issued. But many U.S. employers prefer not to use it because the system is slow and onerous, experts say, and they instead rely on illegal migrants.

Tailored to encourage return

Until 2008, Mexican officials here in Zacatecas state worked with the U.S. Consulate in Monterrey to select temporary workers and facilitate their visa applications. But despite safeguards, officials said the program was fraught with abuses, including recruiters who would bring workers north and “sell” them to other farms and employers.

When the U.S. recession hit and demand for seasonal workers fell, Zacatecas officials said they stopped working with the U.S. Consulate.

Now they work exclusively with Canada and plan to triple the number of workers who go north, where they earn hourly wages of at least \$10, as much as they would make in a day back home. Recruits are screened by Mexican officials based on education level, skills and health, but 80 percent of the workers are returnees whose employers have requested to bring them back.

At the end of the season last year, all 274 guest workers from Zacatecas returned home from Canada, according to state officials and the migrants.

This, of course, was by design.

Only married men are eligible for the Canadian program, preferably those with young children, and their families must remain in Mexico. Another incentive to return home: a cut of the migrants' wages is placed in a Canadian pension fund, receivable only if they return to Mexico.

Then there are the other elements of the Canadian system that U.S. labor unions and farm worker advocates say they would not want to see copied.

Once in Canada, the workers live like monks, sleeping in trailers or barracks, under contractual agreements that forbid them from drinking alcohol and having female visitors, or even socializing with other Mexican workers from different farms.

Most of their time in Canada is limited to sleeping, eating and working long days that can stretch to 15 hours, without overtime pay.

"People look to Canada as a model for their success at making temporary workers truly temporary," said David FitzGerald, an immigration expert at the University of California at San Diego. "But the way they are prevented from staying is by socially isolating them to an extreme degree, controlling their movements and systematically preventing them from interacting with Canadian society," he said.

"From a labor rights perspective, it's troubling, but it's appealing to policymakers because it keeps the workers temporary," FitzGerald said.

'Everything is nice there'

Still, migrants interviewed here in the high desert towns of rural Zacatecas said work in Canada is hard but fair and well-paid. Their employers treated them well, they said, and when they didn't, the local Mexican consulate intervened.

"The consulate threatens to take away their Mexicans, and usually that's enough," said Armando Tenorio, who first worked in Quebec tending flowers and herbs inside a massive greenhouse.

Now Tenorio spends eight months on a berry farm outside Vancouver and comes home every winter with thousands in savings and duffel bags stuffed with chocolate-covered blueberries.

"Everything is nice there. It's not all disorganized like this," he said, back in his home town of Troncoso, where armed men park their pickups on the hill near his house at night, watching the highway below as lookouts for drug traffickers.

Like many workers here, he said he's torn between the need to earn money and the long separations from his wife and daughter.

"Honestly, I'd rather be able to do work in the United States and bring my family with me," he said. "But only with a visa."