

Applied Economic Insights

Theme Overview: Implications of New Immigration Policies for Specific US Agricultural Sectors

Stephen Devadoss^a^a*Texas Tech University*

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Abstract

The agricultural sector is a leading employer of undocumented workers and experiences chronic labor shortages. The Trump administration's deportation policies have intensified this labor scarcity. The articles in this theme evaluate the effects of deportation policies on labor-intensive sectors: fruit & nut, vegetable, nursery, greenhouse, floriculture, and dairy.

1 Introduction

The agricultural sector is a leading employer of undocumented workers and has faced chronic labor shortages for several decades (Devadoss and Luckstead 2008; Gutiérrez-Li 2025). The Trump administration's deportation policies have been intensifying these labor scarcity problems. The objective of this theme is to evaluate the effects of the Trump administration's deportation policies on labor-intensive sectors such as fruit and nut, vegetable, nursery, greenhouse, floriculture, and dairy production. The four articles in this theme address these issues.

2 Immigrant Workforce and Farm Sector

In 2022, about 30 million migrants were working in the United States, accounting for about 18 percent of total US workers; of these immigrants, 22.2 million workers are legally eligible to work, and 8.3 million are unauthorized; however, the total number of unauthorized immigrants residing in the United States is 11 million (Mukherjee and Krogstad 2024). The number of farm workers in the United States is 2.6 million, and about 40 percent of US farm workers are undocumented (Devadoss and Luckstead 2026b).

Unauthorized immigrant farm workers generally do not take jobs from US-born workers, because the work is low-paying and dangerous, physical, and hard labor (Devadoss and Luckstead 2026a), which is consistent with the Pew Center survey that about 75 percent of US citizens consider undocumented immigrants to work on jobs that US citizens do not want (Mukherjee and Krogstad 2024).

3 Policy Confusions and Contradictions

In response to the public protests against deporting hardworking migrant workers, President Trump acknowledged in a post on Truth Social, "Our great Farmers and people in the Hotel and Leisure business have been stating that our very aggressive policy on immigration is taking very good, long time workers away from them, with those jobs being almost impossible to replace" (quoted in Benen 2025). President Trump also indicated that he would like to slow down the deportation of undocumented workers or bring back deported undocumented workers legally to work in the United States. Six state lawmakers in California requested that President Trump focus deportation on criminal immigrants and avoid causing fear and anxiety among migrant workers to avoid workplace disruption (Arcand 2025). However, several Republicans have criticized President Trump's proposal. Jessica Vaughan, Director of Policy Studies at the

Center for Immigration Studies, stated that deportation should not be enforced selectively to support politically connected employers (Arcand 2025). California Republican State Senator Melissa Melendez also criticized President Trump's proposal to give concessions to the construction, hotel, and restaurant industries to employ migrant workers (Arcand 2025).

Despite President Trump's support for farm sectors, other officials in the administration contradict President Trump's position and have indicated that all undocumented migrants will be deported (Arcand 2025; Nobles 2025). For instance, right after President Trump's pledge, ICE raided two agricultural operations in Ventura County in Southern California and arrested more than 200 people in violent combat with protestors (Nobles 2025). White House Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy Stephen Miller and then-DHS Secretary Kristi Noem withdrew the stoppage of raids, and the DHS indicated that anyone in the country without legal status will be deported (Nichols 2025; Zilber 2025). Stephen Miller expressed disappointment that the number of deportations of unauthorized immigrants was too few and threatened to fire ICE officers if 3,000 migrants were not detained per day (Ainsley et al. 2025). In fact, because of the slow pace of the deportation, the Trump administration is seeking to replace ICE regional officials with Border Patrol officials to aggressively deport immigrants (Ainsley and Strickler 2025). Furthermore, White House Border Czar Tom Homan stated that ICE raids are going to massively expand (Meyersohn and Yurkevich 2025). This was confirmed by White House spokesperson Abigail Jackson, who said, "President Trump was elected on his promise to enforce federal immigration law and he is doing just that" (quoted in Zilber 2025). These policies contradict President Trump's public statements, causing a great deal of uncertainty for farmers and growers. Farmers feel they are caught between ICE raids and the practical realities of agricultural production.

4 Economic Impacts on Agricultural Sectors

President Trump's immigration policies through domestic enforcement and border control have reduced the undocumented workforce (Gutiérrez-Li 2025), exacerbating labor shortfalls in labor-intensive sectors, particularly agriculture. Large-scale raids will hurt farmers' ability to produce and supply farm products. Several articles in this theme examine the consequences of these deportation policies on specific industries in agriculture.

The article by Charlton describes the current farm labor market situation in fruit and nut production, research and development (R&D) to automate fruit cultivation, and trends in import competition. She observes that the effects of deporting unauthorized immigrants would drastically impact US fruit and nut production. She concludes that any deportation policies without an adequate increase in labor supply through the guest-worker program or mechanization to soften the impacts of labor scarcity will reduce fruit and nut production. However, growers view H-2A workers as expensive, and efforts to mechanize farm operations through R&D have been ongoing since the 1980s (Harrell 1987), with limited success.

Since ICE raids on California farm fields disrupted field operations and California is the leading producer of vegetables,¹ Gautam and Devadoss focus on quantifying the effects of deporting undocumented farmworkers on employment, wages, and output in California's vegetable industry. Their results show that the removal of 1,000 undocumented workers increases low-skilled native and guest workers' employment by only 26 and 40 workers, respectively, while raising low-skilled wages by just 2 percent. However, annual agricultural output declines by \$36.23 million, along with reduced earnings for complementary inputs such as high-skilled labor, materials, and capital. In an extreme scenario in which half of the undocumented workforce is repatriated, low-skilled native and guest workers' employment would rise by only 211 and 330, respectively, with wages increasing by just 16 percent. However, the

¹ For instance, agriculture is a \$2 billion industry in Ventura County in Southern California, where ICE conducted a massive raid, and farmers in this county rely heavily on immigrant workers to harvest produce year-round (Nobles 2025).

sector would face a significant annual output loss of \$297 million, underscoring the limited availability of domestic and H-2A labor to replenish deported workers and the reality of severe labor shortages (also see Devadoss and Gautam 2025, which studies the impacts of the removal of undocumented workers on the vegetable industry at the national level).

The article by Tejada, Watson, and Nadreau examines the deportation policy on the dairy sector, which is different from other agricultural sectors in that dairy operations are year-round. Since the guest-worker program does not allow H-2A workers to take year-round jobs, dairy farms will face a more serious problem if undocumented workers in dairy operations are deported. This is supported by the Texas Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller, who emphasized that immigrant raids disrupt working conditions on the state's dairy farms (Zilber 2025). Tejada, Watson, and Nadreau find that a large-scale deportation of undocumented workers will not only impact dairy producers but also the dairy supply chain (milk processors, distributors, and retail sectors).

The article by Haque, Hammami, and Khachatryan observes that Florida's \$1.9-billion nursery, greenhouse, and floriculture industry relies heavily on unauthorized labor. Using public cost budgets, labor-cost shares, published supply-and-demand elasticities, and a simulation framework, they find that large-scale deportations will increase production costs, reduce output, cause sales losses, and lead to significant employment cuts. Their findings are useful to growers, workforce planners, and lawmakers considering H-2A expansion.

5 New Policy Proposal

Republican Representative Maria Elvira Salazar of Florida and Democratic Representative Veronica Escobar of Texas introduced a bill—the Dignity Act of 2025—to provide legal status for certain undocumented migrants who have been in the United States since before 2021 (Nobles 2025). Under this bill, these migrants will apply for 7 years of legal status to legally work in the United States. This legal status will not entitle these migrants to federal benefits or a pathway to citizenship. This bill is aimed at helping farmers and food services continue to have access to undocumented workers, in line with President Trump's stance on providing temporary passes to allow migrant laborers to work in the farm and hospitality sectors (Arcand 2025; Nobles 2025). As of the end of September 2025, no progress has been made in passing this bill.

6 Unintended Consequences

Large-scale deportation can hurt the economies of rural areas, where labor-intensive agriculture is widely prevalent, because of the lack of workers to carry out important farm operations such as vegetable harvesting and fruit picking. This will reduce the farm produce supply and hurt the food supply chain. This can also have a spillover effect as farmers may reduce the input demand, hurting the allied industries. Furthermore, reduced production will lead to greater dependence on imports of fruits and vegetables.

7 Conclusions

Most of the farm workers are not criminals but rather hardworking migrants who economically contribute to the farm economy (Nobles 2025). Consequently, many farm leaders do not support deporting the immigrant workers and have expressed their concerns. For example, Shay Myers of Owyhee Produce in Idaho cautioned that without immigrant workers, farmers may not be able to feed people in the United States (Zilber 2025). Texas peach grower Katelyn Eames pointed out that if it were not for undocumented farm workers, there would not be any picking of peaches (Zilber 2025). Even though there have been only a few well-publicized raids in meatpacking and farms and much of the deportation is in urban areas, President Trump's migration policies are sparking fear and anxiety among

immigrant workers, and they are afraid to come to work because of possible apprehension (Arcand 2025; Martin and Rutledge 2026). Moreover, these raids are confusing not only for immigrant workers but also for farmers and growers who need to complete critical farm operations, such as harvesting. Given the acute labor scarcity in US agriculture, policymakers should be prudent in implementing immigration policies without exacerbating labor shortages and lowering agricultural production.

About the Authors: Stephen Devadoss (Corresponding Author Email: stephen.devadoss@ttu.edu) is the Emabeth Thompson Endowed Professor in the Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX.

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