

Ripples from the East Coast Stream:

Contributions from Migrant Hispanic Workers to Maine's Wild Blueberry Industry

by Vaishali Mamgain

Maine's blueberry harvest relies heavily on Hispanic migrant labor. Vaishali Mamgain uses interviews with Hispanic migrant workers and Maine blueberry growers to illustrate the contribution of this generally "unseen" group to Maine's economy as workers and consumers. Given Maine's aging population and the changing demographics of the blueberry-harvesting workforce, these workers are extremely important to the industry: without them, employers say, the wild blueberry industry would not be competitive. Mamgain concludes by discussing state and federal laws and policies in terms of their potential impact on Hispanic migrant workers.

INTRODUCTION

Migrant Hispanic workers play an important role in U.S. agriculture. They are particularly important in harvesting fruits and vegetables across the U.S., taking low-wage jobs that U.S. citizens often do not want. These migrant workers form three major movements: the West, the Midwest and the East Coast streams. The East Coast stream, which originates in Florida and works its way up the eastern states, harvests a wide variety of crops as it flows. In Maine, which has recently become the final stopping point for the East Coast stream, migrant workers play a vital role in the low bush wild blueberry industry. By closely examining this role, we can see important broader economic and national policy implications. These findings can inform federal and state policy on immigration issues.

The work force involved in Maine's wild blueberry industry has changed dramatically in recent years, with Hispanic migrant workers now contributing significantly to the annual harvest. During the 2011 (July–August) wild blueberry harvest in Washington County, we interviewed 46 migrant workers, along with blueberry growers and social service providers. This research, the first of its kind for this state, reveals the importance of these workers to the industry and their economic impact on the state of Maine as both producers and consumers.

According to the latest Census figures, Maine's population is the oldest in the nation. This is a problem for the state as a whole and for Maine's agriculture in particular. With 8,136 farms covering 1.34 million acres and producing \$617 million in annual sales (and a total annual impact estimated at \$1.2 billion), agriculture and related activities are a significant part of the Maine economy (USDA 2007). Wild blueberries are grown on approximately 60,000 acres in Maine. The direct and indirect economic impact of Maine's blueberry crop was \$250 million in 2007, making it a major contributor to Maine's economy (umaine.edu/blueberries). It is sobering to note that in Aroostook and Washington counties, still major agricultural regions, one-third of the population is over 65 years old. How, then, can Maine meet its labor needs? With respect to agricultural work and in particular the harvest of blueberry, potato, and broccoli crops, migrant workers play an important role.

The East Coast migrant stream originates in Florida, where migrant workers pick strawberries, cucumbers, and oranges. They then move to Georgia to pick peaches and pecans, to North Carolina to harvest sweet potatoes, yams, and tobacco, and to New Jersey to pick high-bush blueberries. Finally, they come to Maine for the wild blueberry harvest. They may stay for the apple harvest, or be employed to make Christmas wreaths (Perez-Febles, personal communication).

Nationally, the migrant population of agricultural workers is diverse but is mostly non-white. According to the National Center for Farmworker Health's web site, 83 percent are Hispanic, and there are people of Jamaican, Thai, Laotian, and Haitian origin. Most of them are male (79 percent) and although they range in age from 13 to 65, the average migrant worker is 36 years old.¹

The demographic composition of Maine's blueberry-harvesting workforce has changed dramatically in the past decade. Wild blueberries had been picked by local (white) families and by Native American peoples (Passamaquoddy and Mi'kmaq), for whom this was an annual ritual and celebration. Those rakers have largely been replaced by a crew of "professional" Hispanic migrant workers.

Despite their importance to the agricultural industry, Hispanic farmworkers are almost invisible to many in Maine's population of 1.3 million. As in other states, Maine's farms tend to be spatially separated from population centers, and workers are housed close to the fields they harvest. Blueberries, for instance, are grown in Downeast Maine, the state's easternmost counties, approximately four hours north of the more populated areas of southern Maine. Also, Hispanic farmworkers have only recently become a regular presence in Maine (starting in late 1990s). Given this, most of Maine's population would find it difficult to imagine that the state's agriculture is so dependent on this ethnic minority.

The study reported here quantifies the productivity and earnings of this population in various jobs over the course of one year of migrant work. It documents the crucial role Hispanic migrants play in the Maine economy, both directly, by harvesting and processing the wild blueberry crop, and indirectly, through their activities as consumers while in Maine. As economists Card (2000) and Peri (2010) measured the effect of immigrant workers in an economy, showing the ripple effects that must be taken into account. Several previous studies in other states found that migrant workers spend nearly half (or in some cases, more than half) of their income in-state when they work in these states (e.g., Slesinger and Deller 2003; Rosenbaum 2002). Working in Maine for a month, the migrant Hispanic farmworkers spend money on food, gas, and telephone service, and in some cases, pay for housing. Most of them also support family in their country of origin.

METHODOLOGY

I interviewed Hispanic workers (rakers, mechanical harvester operators, and packers), and employers in Maine's blueberry industry to assess economic contributions by migrant workers. I asked workers a specific set of questions and also recorded and transcribed open-ended comments in one-on-one interviews with each participant. The subjects were recruited on-site at the blueberry harvest camps. Participation was entirely voluntary and no compensation was awarded. I interviewed a total of 46 migrant workers: one person from El Salvador, one from Panama, three from Puerto Rico, three from Honduras, one from Guatemala, and 37 from Mexico. Within Mexico, Michoacan was the most represented region. The translator was from Michoacan, so perhaps people from his region were more willing to talk; or more likely, Michoacan was so well represented because the Hispanic population in a nearby Maine town has a significant presence from Michoacan (Mamgain 2011).

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I also interviewed two of the three main blueberry growers, professionals from Maine Migrant Health, Maine Migrant Education program, and the state monitor advocate, to get a more complete picture. As with workers, I asked specific questions of all the employers and open-ended comments were recorded and transcribed.

RESULTS

These interviews revealed much about the migrant workers and their impact on Maine's economy: their roles and productivity in the Maine blueberry harvest, their income and expenditures. Responses provided data about demographic composition; migration patterns and other employment, including contributions to harvests of other crops along the East Coast stream; and their

history working in the U.S. The interviews also elucidated much about the lives of the workers: their work ethic and attitude towards the job, their family structures, aspirations for their children, relationships with family and friends, and how they use information technology to communicate. This paper focuses on their role and economic impact; for findings about their work ethic, family lives, beliefs, and aspirations, see Mamgain (2012).

The median age of the workers interviewed was 32 years, consistent with National Center for Farmworker Health’s data. Five of the six people who were under 20 were full-time residents in the U.S., but qualify as migrant workers under the Migrant Health definition (US Code, Title 42) because they travel to multiple states for agricultural work. Moreover, four of these went to school during the school year and only picked during the summer months. Of the 46 workers interviewed, only five were women (ages 23–49). Although this workforce is no doubt (increasingly) male, female workers may also be underrepresented because they were less willing to be interviewed (one woman approached by the author demurred and asked that her husband be interviewed instead).

Workers were not asked whether they had valid documentation to live and work in the U.S., but were asked how often they returned to their country of origin. Of the 46 interviewed, the five who were U.S. residents and the three from Puerto Rico had no problem with legal status. Of the remaining 38, 18 workers said they spent more than a month in their country of origin every year. Given the increased difficulty in crossing the border without papers, and the fact that this study was conducted in 2011, when increased raids by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) had employers wary of hiring undocumented immigrants, we can surmise that these workers had legal papers that allowed them to come and go freely. The workers reported they had to present two proofs of identification and that employers confirmed their legal status using E-Verify (an online program operated by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services that allows employers to check an employee’s eligibility based on matching records from government databases). Thus, it seems plausible that, in 2011, most if not all migrant workers in Maine were properly documented.

Migration Patterns and Other Employment

It is striking both how much these workers travel for employment, and how many crops they harvest.

Their work involved harvesting not just blueberries in Maine, but also blueberries in New Jersey, North Carolina, Florida, grapes and apples in New York and Pennsylvania, peaches in Virginia and Georgia, onions in Georgia, celery, tomatoes, grapefruits, and oranges in Florida. Many also make Christmas wreaths in North Carolina.

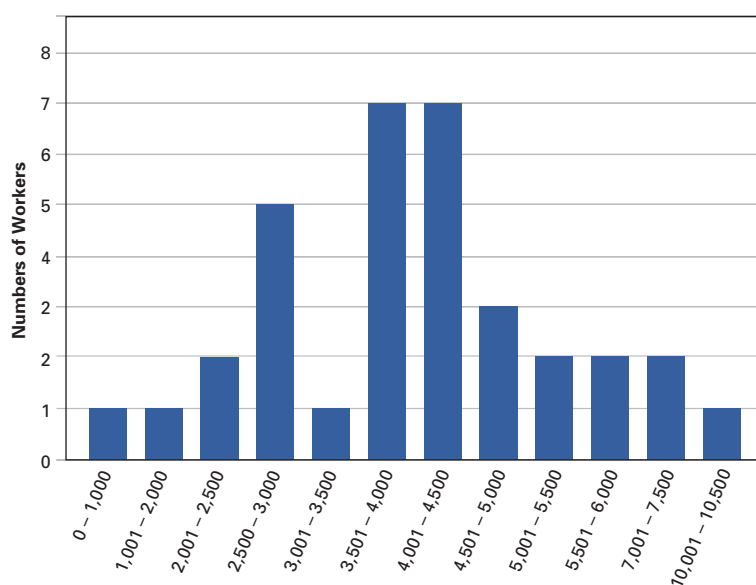
Their most commonly observed migration pattern includes picking oranges in Florida in the spring, highbush (cultivated) blueberries in New Jersey in July, and wild blueberries in Maine in August.

TABLE 1: Seasonal Work Pattern

Crop	Interviewees Who Harvested
Maine lowbush blueberries	46
New Jersey highbush blueberries	22
Florida oranges	19
Apples (ME, NY, NJ, PA, VA, MI)	13
North Carolina highbush blueberries	6
New York grapes	5
Florida highbush blueberries	4

Within this basic pattern, however, there were variations. Thirteen of the workers picked apples in six different states (including Maine). Although most of them travelled along the East Coast, there were some who traveled to Michigan to pick high-bush blueberries or apples primarily because they had brothers who were harvesting there. Among the other states and crops mentioned were sweet potatoes in Louisiana, Christmas wreaths in Maine and North Carolina, and watermelons in Missouri.

Workers who are in school or college typically pick one or two crops a year. They frequently choose to harvest blueberries in New Jersey in July and wild blueberries in Maine in August since these harvests occur during summer vacation. Similarly, several women mentioned that they did not move during the school year because they did not want to interrupt their children’s education. In between their travels, many of the workers return to their country of origin. Twenty-eight of the 43 non-Puerto Ricans go back to their country of origin regularly.

FIGURE 1: **Income Distribution for Blueberry Rakers**

Productivity and Earnings

According to our survey, the median raker filled between 60 and 70 bins per day during the blueberry harvest. Each bin contains 23.5 pounds of berries, and rakers receive \$2.25/bin. Based on this information, the median income earned per day by rakers was \$146.25. The five people who raked more than 120 bins a day earned \$300/day or more. Low numbers reflect women with children who did not rake full time because they had to care for their children, and one who had suffered a miscarriage in the fields and by doctor's orders, was not raking anymore.

The 2011 harvest was unusually long and productive, lasting between five and six weeks; rakers also reported harvesting better berries than usual. But, as the Wild Blueberry Crop Statistics web site shows, these numbers can be cyclical: a bumper crop can be followed by a dismal year. For example, an 80-million-pound harvest in 2004 was followed by a 46-million-pound harvest in 2005.

The income distribution for rakers is shown in Figure 1, based on 25 days of raking. About 50 percent of our sample made more than \$4,000 in the 2011 blueberry harvest. Their work day started as early as 5 a.m. and ended between 5 and 6 p.m. Respondents who worked at the packing plant had incomes that ranged from \$1,900 to \$3,500. Most workers were paid the same hourly rate, so differences between their incomes reflect differences in the numbers of hours worked.

Number of Years in the U.S.

The age when an individual moved to the U.S. and when he or she started doing agricultural work are highly correlated (see Mamgain 2012, for more details). Many of the younger people who came here with migrant parents continue their parents' tradition, but have aspirations to pursue other careers.

Many in this work force are relative newcomers to the Maine harvest though they have done other agricultural work in the U.S. for much longer. Nearly half have worked for fewer than three years in Maine although they have more than nine years of experience doing agricultural work elsewhere in the U.S. Of the three who had been in the U.S. fewer than three years, two were legal residents and had come to the U.S. specifically for Maine's blueberry harvest. This finding may support the observation by Massey (2011) that the rate of *undocumented* migration to the U.S. from Mexico dropped to zero in 2008 (emphasis added). Massey attributes this to stricter enforcement of immigration laws, a shrinking economy, and the increased danger in being smuggled across the border. The Pew Hispanic Center (2011) also reported that the number of Mexicans leaving for the U.S. between 2006 and 2010 declined by 60 percent. In a subsequent section, we will discuss the ramifications of this drop-off.

Roles in Maine's Blueberry Harvest

Maine is the world's largest producer of wild blueberries, and although individual growers do not reveal actual production statistics, one can surmise the volume of blueberries by looking at the area under cultivation. Larson (2005) estimates that it took approximately 302,000 hours to harvest the blueberries in Washington County. The University of Maine Cooperative Extension's Wild Blueberry Crop Statistics web page shows an approximately fourfold increase in blueberry production in the last 30 years (from an average of 23 million pounds per year over the five years from 1978 to 1982 to an annual average of 86 million pounds for the 2008–2012 period).²

Migrant workers play several roles in the harvest of this crop. Some work on the barrens, either raking or driving mechanical harvesters, and others pack in the processing plants. The workers interviewed included 35 rakers, seven packers, and four who drove mechanical harvesters.

*Total Annual Earnings and
Comparison to Other Work*

The sample surveyed varied widely, from college-age students who only worked during the summers, to women who worked a few hours a day, to the professional agricultural workers who worked three or more jobs. The annual median earnings were \$16,000 for an individual, and the range was from \$2,500 or less to \$35,000. Full-time workers had annual median earnings of between \$20,000 and \$22,500.

A comparison of the daily earnings (Table 2) shows that the Maine blueberry harvest provides the highest daily rate of earnings—higher than the high-bush blueberry harvest in New Jersey, North Carolina, or Florida, and higher than harvesting apples, grapes, oranges, or doing landscaping and other jobs. Their migrant work was the primary income-earning activity for the workers interviewed. Only three of those interviewed did any agricultural work in their country of origin (Mexico).

TABLE 2: **Comparison of Daily Earnings
in Different Crops**

Crops	Median Earnings	Average Earnings	Number of People in Sample
Maine lowbush blueberries	\$158	\$162	46
New Jersey blueberries	\$114	\$119	23
Apples	\$128	\$119	14
Landscaping/ other jobs	\$90	\$93	10
Grapes	\$73	\$80	5
Florida oranges	\$68	\$74	18
North Carolina blueberries	\$75	\$55	5
Florida blueberries	\$107	\$113	4

*Migrant Worker Contributions
to Maine’s Economy*

The workers who were interviewed sent some of their earnings home, but also contributed to the Maine economy by paying taxes and spending money on food, gas, rent (in some cases), and cell phones. Their (median) monthly expenditures of \$500 on food, \$180 on gas,

\$50 on telephone service and miscellaneous expenses are a significant contribution to the economies of the small rural towns in which they work. Moreover, they contribute to state and federal income taxes, including social security.

Food

Respondents said they spent a considerable amount of money on food during the Maine harvest. Their median expenditure on food during the approximately month-long harvest was \$500 per person, nearly twice what they spent per month in their “home” state when they were not on the move. Because the nearest supermarkets are so far away, few prepared food themselves. Most workers bought food from the canteens selling Mexican food, set up by local families, and beverages from local convenience stores. Many reported having to spend a lot on bottled water, since there was no source of drinking water in the fields or the camps. If one assumes that there were 500 Hispanic workers (a conservative number) at the month-long 2011 blueberry harvest, they spent an estimated \$285,300 on food alone. This expenditure on food also generated taxes (see following section on taxes).

Gasoline

The workers also spent money on gasoline, both to get to Maine and on their travels while working within the state. They reported spending from \$25 to \$4,000 (the latter figure is the cost of driving from Mexico to Maine). While working in Maine, the median amount of money spent on gas per month was \$180. Of the 46 workers interviewed, the total expenditure for gasoline (including travel to and within Maine) was nearly \$11,500. Projected for an estimated 500 workers, this suggests a total gasoline expenditure of more than \$143,000, although our data do not separate out how much of this was spent at Maine gas stations vs stations outside of Maine.

Telephones

Most workers (>70%) had a standard \$50/month phone plan, and only two did not have a phone or share a phone with a friend. Although the \$50/month plan was most common, some of the workers spent more than \$100/month on cell phone plans. Money spent on cell phone service did not contribute directly to the local economy, but did so indirectly through state taxes and fees on telecommunications services.

Housing: Rent and Home Ownership

The three largest blueberry growers in Maine provide on-site, free-of-charge housing to their workers. One of the largest growers said it cost \$120,000 per year to maintain the housing camps (Lindquist, personal communication). Smaller growers, who own more than 50 percent of the land under blueberry cultivation, do not provide housing. Workers who rake for the smaller growers typically pay rent in nearby towns. The workers interviewed for this study all worked for the largest growers, so this report does not include any data on rent paid in Maine.

Almost all of the workers, however, either had a mortgage payment or paid rent in some other state. Twenty-one workers paid rent in the U.S. (median: \$240/month), the majority of them in Florida, but others in Texas, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New York, Missouri, and Virginia. Eleven owned their own homes (five in their country of origin, the other six in Texas or Florida).

Taxes

All workers in this survey paid state and federal income taxes (deducted at source). Since most bought food rather than preparing it, they also paid the applicable Maine state tax (7 percent) for these purchases. Assuming that \$250,000 of the total \$285,300 expended on food was on "prepared foods," food purchases by migrant workers generated \$17,500 in state tax revenue in a month. They also paid taxes on any non-food items purchased in Maine.

Savings and Remittances

Thirty-nine of the 46 workers in our sample sent money home regularly (this includes the younger crew, who contributed to the family even though their families were now settled in the U.S.), and two of the others sent money home occasionally. The average remittance was \$4,920 and the median was \$4,000. Twenty-five percent of the workers sent \$7,000 or more home annually.

Conclusions from Surveys

As previously noted, over the past two decades, the increase in the number of Hispanic workers raking blueberries in Maine has been dramatic. Although it is the most distant point of the East Coast Stream, one can see why so many of the workers come to Maine: their earnings are significantly higher than in any other agricultural job. As one of the rakers put it, raking Maine

blueberries is the highest-paying job there is for agricultural workers. Although the work is hard, most of the workers say they enjoy it, and driven by a strong work ethic, use their earnings to support their families, send money back home, and pay their living expenses.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE INDUSTRY

Interviews with employers discussed the evolution of the workforce and whether mechanization could replace Hispanic rakers.

Importance to Employers

The three major growers are Wyman's, Cherryfield Foods, and North Eastern Blueberry Company (NEBCO). Small growers/leaseholders control or harvest more than 50 percent of the land, yet, the industry is dominated by the three major growers who have a strong influence on the production and price of blueberries. This study focused on the crews that worked for the three major employers. NEBCO is owned by the Passamaquoddy tribe and employs mainly native rakers (from the Passamaquoddy and Mi'kmaq tribes) although there are some Hispanic rakers in the native camps.

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Employers at Wyman's and Cherryfield Foods started hiring Hispanic workers in the mid-1990s. Asked why they stopped hiring the local Maine workforce, employers explained that the younger generation of local Mainers did not want to do agricultural work. One employer said, "Local labor no longer wanted to participate; they didn't like how intensive the labor was in our industry. Work ethics have changed from generation to generation."

Thus, the drop-off in migration described previously, particularly by younger workers, is of concern to the blueberry growers in Maine, who can see how it will affect production. When I asked a grower what he

would do if the “Mexicans” stopped coming, he gave a wry laugh and said, “Boy, that would be something. I guess I’d just stop commercial production and run a farm-stand.” A human resources manager at another plant said, “God forbid! We would have to shut down—our jobs depend on their labor.” Another employer, when asked what they would do if no migrant labor came to Maine, responded, “If we didn’t have the influx of migrant labor we simply wouldn’t get the job done.”

This mirrors what has been found in many other states. In Wisconsin, when asked what they would do without migrant labor, growers said they would close their businesses (40 percent), go into another line of work or sell their land/equipment (28 percent), mechanize to reduce hand labor (35 percent), or retire (12 percent) (Slesinger and Deller 2003). In Virginia, tobacco, apple, and other fruit and vegetable growers estimated that without migrant and seasonal farm workers production would decrease drastically, from 7 percent (nursery) to 85 percent (tobacco) to 90 percent (apples, other fruits) to 100 percent (vegetables) (Trupo, Alwang and Lamie 1998).

Mechanization

Can migrant labor be replaced by mechanization? There has been a sharp decline in the number of hand-raking crews at both Cherryfield’s and Wyman’s. This may have been precipitated by labor troubles at Wyman’s in 1998 and 1999 (Fritzsche 2003). Wyman’s reduced the number of hand-raking crews from 17 in the late 1990s to five in 2011. At present, 30 percent of the total berries at Wyman’s are harvested by hand rakers (Lindquist, personal communication). Cherryfield Foods, which used to have many hand-raking crews, was down to one hand-raking crew this year.

One of the other growers, when asked whether he would continue to mechanize, said that he believed the company had reached an equilibrium situation (Lindquist, personal communication). Since 15 percent of their land could not be harvested mechanically (either due to the terrain or irrigation systems that might interfere with the harvesters), the company would continue to have a certain number of hand-raking crews. This 15 percent of their land yields 30 percent of the total berries harvested.

Although it might be assumed that the trend toward mechanization will reduce the need for migrant labor, it does not completely eliminate it, as companies also use migrant labor to run the mechanical harvesters.

However, these workers are mainly from Canada, rather than part of the East Coast Stream of Hispanic workers. It is a matter of speculation whether in the future more Hispanic migrant workers will transfer to harvesting with machines rather than hand raking. Migrant labor will also be needed to harvest blueberries for smaller growers, who constitute more than 50 percent of the acreage under blueberry cultivation, and are less likely to mechanize. To harvest blueberries mechanically, growers have to spend a considerable amount of money to remove boulders from the barrens and level the land. Most smaller growers do not have the capital to do so. Additionally, since 99.5 percent of the wild blueberry crop is either frozen or canned (Yarborough 2004), the processing plants also rely heavily on migrant labor.

IMPORTANCE TO MAINE

Our research reveals the importance of migrant Hispanic agricultural workers to the state of Maine. Clearly, it is in Maine’s interest to be supportive of these workers, as they are essential to Maine’s wild blueberry harvest, and they are an important resource to a state whose population is aging. Based on interviews with the employers, it seems likely that Maine’s wild blueberry industry would be crippled without these workers since they are an integral part of both the harvest (especially for smaller growers) and processing. The ripples from the stream of Hispanic migrant workers are also important to Maine: the workers contribute money to Maine’s economy through expenditures on food, gasoline, phones, housing, and taxes while they are here.

Alan Caron, in an editorial in the *Portland Press Herald* (May 29, 2013) argues that Maine needs skilled immigrants. My research shows that Maine also needs unskilled immigrants although one could argue that the term “unskilled” is inadequate. The definition of “skilled” under the Immigration and Naturalization Agency (now ICE) essentially means any job that requires more than two years of training (Stickney, personal communication). Thus, despite these workers’ incredible productivity and professionalism, they are referred to as unskilled.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Federal Policy

As events in the last few years have shown, federal laws and policy can do a great deal to either facilitate or

impede the migrant worker flow and their contribution to Maine's blueberry harvest. Since the bigger employers in Maine's blueberry industry have started using the E-Verify system to comply with ICE, there has been speculation that this might deter people from coming to rake. The immigration reform currently being advocated by the Senate does include a provision for employers to continue using E-Verify—a system that may lead to major privacy issues. However, if the 11 million undocumented workers can apply to normalize their status, they ought to be able to work as their paperwork is processed.

In a historic 68-32 vote June 27, 2013, the U.S. Senate voted to address comprehensive immigration reform. Among the proposals is a policy to grant amnesty to the 11 million undocumented workers—many of whom live in constant fear of deportation or harassment and yet are crucial to certain sectors in the economy. Although the path to citizenship for these workers will not be quick, easy, or inexpensive, it provides them a chance to come out of the shadows and join the mainstream economy. This increase in the number of workers who can participate in the labor force without fearing for their or their family's safety has clear benefits for the economy. The bill also gives faster citizenship to farm workers, which may be crucial for a state such as Maine. In order to be signed into law by President Obama, the Senate's comprehensive immigration reform will first need to be passed by the House of Representatives, where House Speaker John Boehner has not expressed support.

State Policy

Like federal policy, state laws and policies can encourage or discourage the flow of migrant agricultural workers. We need only look to examples of recent laws in states such as Georgia, Arizona, and Alabama to see how detrimental the effects of state law can be.

Georgia's stringent anti-immigration law, passed in 2011, resulted in losses to agriculture estimated at somewhere between \$300 million and \$1 billion (Baxter 2011). These losses have been compounded by the multiplier effect of agriculture on other parts of Georgia's economy, such as processing and transportation. Georgia's experience serves as a good example of the impact that a law that impedes migrant labor can have on a state's economy. Testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees and Border Security, Georgia's Agricultural Commissioner Gary Black advocated a guest worker

program to address Georgia's labor shortage. According to Jim Galloway's Political Insider Blog on the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* web site, Black was quoted as saying "E-Verify is a real problem without fixing the guest worker program."

State laws such as those enacted recently in Arizona and Alabama can serve to make migrant workers feel unwelcome. As a companion study reveals (Mamgain 2012), migrant workers' social network allows word to spread quickly about policies and behaviors perceived as harassment, intimidation, or otherwise unwelcoming.

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Beth Stickney, former executive director and founder of the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project (ILAP), a nonprofit group in Maine whose mission is to provide legal assistance on immigration issues for low-income Mainers, observes that some policies in Maine can be perceived as unwelcoming. ILAP was aware of several immigrant doctors who "have had a terrible time getting or renewing their driver licenses while their applications...for H-1B extensions or for LPR status were pending—making it hard for them to live [and] work here—and then they tell their immigrant friends about the hard time they are having, making those friends look at going to other states." Stickney reports that ILAP has "data on hundreds of police stops of immigrants of color that appear to be 'driving while brown' situations...being questioned by police and asked for papers when sitting on a bench...being stopped and questioned by police while walking down the sidewalk.... Word gets around about that kind of activity by police and people will say 'why should we go to/stay in Maine, where we're going to get harassed by police because of our color?'" (Stickney, personal communication).

Though state laws cannot ease the visa process, since visa processes are a federal matter, Maine can avoid the kind of anti-immigration laws that have been enacted by Georgia, Arizona, and Alabama. Furthermore, as

Stickney suggests, “Maine can restore access to driver licenses and prohibit state law enforcement officers from inquiring about immigration status.” In May 2011, the Maine State Legislature voted to defeat LD 1496: “An Act to Enforce Immigration Laws and Restrict Benefits to Legal Citizens”—an Arizona-style immigration bill that would have required local and state officials to enquire about immigration status. At the last minute, the bill’s sponsor, Rep. Kathy Chase, killed the bill requesting that the legislature vote “ought not to pass.” It was speculated that her change in position was in part the result of pressure from the hospitality industry in her constituency.

Role of Nongovernmental Organizations

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are already involved in supporting migrant farm workers in Maine. The Maine Migrant Education Program helps out-of-school youths who are younger than 21 get their high school diplomas. The program also organizes Harvest School, a three- to four-week educational program for young children of migrant workers. Maine Migrant Health, another federally funded organization, helps provide health care for any worker who qualifies as a migrant. This program spends \$700,000 per year on health care for all migrant workers (of which blueberry rakers are a small segment) in the state.

Both these NGOs face the challenge of a lack of continuity in working with the blueberry rakers who are in Maine for only a limited time. For example, Maine Migrant Health cannot follow up on care for a migrant worker who has diabetes the way a local provider can with a year-round Maine resident. Yet, these organizations play important roles and seem to understand the unique challenges of migrant workers who come to Maine. In light of the value of migrant farm workers to Maine, both NGOs deserve our support.

Federal Policy Recommendations

Federal laws and policies should be based on knowledge about the roles of migrant workers and on a deeper understanding of their lives and aspirations. For example, from an employer’s point of view, it is important that workers be able to freely move from state to state, as they are crucial to each employer within a specific window of time in the growing season. It is also important to note that many of these workers spend a portion of the year in their home country with their extended families. Most of them plan on retiring to

their country of origin. Any immigration legislation should pay heed to this flow of workers from one crop/one state/one employer to another.

An understanding of the work life of migrant workers reveals why a bill introduced to Congress by Rep. Lamar Smith of Texas in 2011 would have been ineffective had it passed. This bill, an overhaul of the current H-2A program, would have allowed a half million guest workers in to the country, but would have tied guest workers to a specific employer. As our study has shown, migrant workers depend on working for a series of employers, harvesting different crops sequentially in several states. Rep. Smith’s bill would have made this impossible. Because there is not a sufficient quantity and duration of employment in any one of these harvests, we would predict that such a bill such would cripple many of the harvests that depend on migrant workers. As the furthest tip in the Eastern Stream (and the most distant travel for many of the workers), the Maine blueberry harvest would certainly have felt the negative effects of this law. Congress should instead consider a guest-worker program that would allow workers to travel easily between states, work for different employers for each harvest, and easily return back to their country of origin when they wish.

Our examination of the aspirations of migrant Hispanic blueberry workers reveals the positive incentive that would be provided by the DREAM (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) Act, first introduced in 2001 and reintroduced in 2011. “DREAMers” are young undocumented workers who were brought to the U.S. by their parents. In May 2012, President Obama eased up on the government’s policy of deporting the DREAMers and announced the reprieve program that deferred deportation for two years, although there was no provision of legal status. More than 300,000 young people applied for this program, even though by “outing” themselves, they exposed their parents and older siblings who were not covered under the deferred deportation program.

CONCLUSION

Our study highlights the many different crops in different states that are harvested by Hispanic workers of the East Coast Stream. By stringing together all these jobs, these workers can make a living and support their families. For this to be viable, work must be available on crop after crop in these different states. If

mechanization, crop failure, or onerous state laws and policies eliminated some of this work, could the viability of the entire stream be compromised? Or, if federal law becomes so restrictive that new workers do not join the East Coast stream as current workers age and retire, what will become of the agricultural industries that depend on the East Coast Stream of migrant workers to harvest their crops? 🐞

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ENDNOTES

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