

Agricultural employment: has the decline ended?

*The long-term decrease in farm employment
has moderated during recent years,
although technological gains continue,
and farmers often need to moonlight in
nonfarm jobs in order to remain in the business*

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Although agricultural employment accounts for less than 4 percent of all jobs, it has an important place in the Nation's economy. The ability of such a small percentage of the labor force to provide for most of the country's food needs, as well as for exports, testifies to the skill and productivity of the agricultural sector.

Agriculture has received extensive media coverage in recent years, especially concerning parity prices, price supports, and grain exports and embargoes. Its employment has been affected by the transformations in farm number, size, and scale. As farm technology has improved, the more intensive use of capital equipment has shifted emphasis from people to machinery. During the last three decades these structural and technological changes have had a profound impact on jobs and have affected both the character of the agricultural labor force and its size. However, since 1970, these changes have slowed dramatically. (See table 1.)

During 1976–80, agricultural employment held about steady at an annual average of 3.3 million, the sharp declines of the 1950's and 1960's having virtually stopped. Since 1970, agricultural employment has only declined by 150,000 compared with losses of 1.7 and 2.0 million in the previous two decades. (See table 2.)

Because of the nature of agricultural employment, it is useful to examine two data series in order to obtain a more complete picture of the trends and composition of the labor force. The monthly Current Population Survey (CPS) provides information for those whose primary employment is in agriculture and who are age 16 or older. It comprises the self-employed and persons who work for wages or salaries, as well as those who put in 15 hours or more per week as unpaid workers on family farms. The Hired Farm Working Force data are obtained from supplementary questions to the CPS asked only in December and cover all persons age 14 or older who worked in agriculture at some point during that calendar year for wages or salaries. These two series overlap for those wage and salary workers whose primary occupation is in agriculture, but both are necessary to account for the many who combine work in agriculture with other pursuits. Both surveys confirm that recently the long-term decrease in farm employment has slowed.

In agriculture, the primary unit has historically been the family farm. In the past, land was abundant and labor rather than capital was the main input. Family members were the primary suppliers of the labor, and their goal was to provide enough food for their own consumption, as well as a surplus to sell. The impetus behind the development and adoption of technology on individual farms was the desire to raise more agricultur-

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al products or produce them at a lower cost, within the constraints of the family's fixed resources of land and labor. The immediate result was an increase in the income of the innovative farm family, but quite naturally production also rose for the agriculture industry as a whole, as the use of technology grew. So the supply of agricultural products increased more than demand, driving prices down. Many farming units could no longer make enough income and were forced out of business. Some displaced workers moved into nonfarm occupations, and others reverted to small-scale or subsistence farming, combined with nonagricultural employment when it was available.¹ Both moonlighting and nonfarm employment by family members have enabled families to stay in farming.

Worker characteristics

Sex, age, and race. Agricultural employment tends to be disproportionately male and white. In 1980, women accounted for only 20 percent of such employment, compared with 43 percent of other jobs. Furthermore, almost one-third of the women in agriculture were unpaid family workers. In contrast, more than half of the men were self-employed. About 40 percent of each sex were wage and salary workers. Both men and women tended to be older than their nonagricultural counterparts, as the percentages in the following tabulation for 1980 show:

	<i>Agricultural</i>	<i>Nonagricultural</i>
Men:		
16 to 24 years	23.7	20.0
25 to 54 years	49.3	65.0
55 years or older . . .	27.0	15.0
Women:		
16 to 24 years	21.8	24.1
25 to 54 years	61.5	62.5
55 years or older . . .	16.9	13.4

By race or ethnicity, whites make up 92 percent of agricultural employment, blacks 8 percent. Hispanics, who are included in the white total, make up 7 percent. Of the working age population, whites account for 88 percent, blacks 12 percent, and Hispanics 5 percent.² In the past, blacks made up a larger proportion of agricultural employment, 11 percent in 1970 and 16 percent in 1962, while representing 11 percent of the population in 1970 and 10 percent in 1962. A historical series of farm operators³ shows a long-term decline of blacks and other races as a proportion of total farm operators in the United States and the South since 1920.

Minorities are predominantly wage and salary workers and are less apt to be self-employed than are whites. Wage and salary jobs accounted for 39 percent of white, 74 percent of black, and 90 percent of Hispanic agricultural employment. Fifty-one percent of the white

Table 1. Employed agricultural workers by selected characteristics, annual averages, 1970 and 1980

(In thousands)

Worker	1970		1980	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total, 16 years and over	3,462	100.0	3,310	100.0
Men	2,861	82.6	2,664	80.5
Wage and salary workers	979	34.2	1,116	41.9
Self-employed workers	1,722	60.2	1,446	54.3
Unpaid family workers	160	5.6	101	3.8
Women	601	17.4	646	19.5
Wage and salary workers	174	29.0	267	41.3
Self-employed workers	88	14.6	182	28.2
Unpaid family workers	339	56.4	197	30.5
Whites	3,094	89.4	3,052	92.2
Blacks and others	368	10.6	258	7.8

workers were self-employed, compared with only 23 percent of blacks and 9 percent of Hispanics. Much smaller proportions were unpaid family workers: 9 percent of whites, 3 percent of blacks, and just 1 percent of Hispanics.

Region and residence. The South and North Central regions (as designated by the U.S. Bureau of Census) have always provided the largest share of the agricultural labor force. In 1980, more than 70 percent of those employed in this sector lived in 1 of these 2 regions. Nevertheless, there has been substantial growth in the Western region, which was the only area to record an increase in the level of agricultural employment. (See table 3.)

Agricultural employment once implied farm residence, but this is no longer the case. Thus, while 75 percent of agricultural workers lived on farms in 1960, this proportion dwindled to 63 percent in 1970, and 47 percent in 1980.⁴

Jobs decline, those remaining change

In 1870, almost 50 percent of employed persons worked in agriculture⁵ and one farmworker could only supply five people with farm products. By 1980, just 4 percent of the employed were in agriculture, and each one supplied food for nearly 70 others.⁶ As the need to commit a large percentage of the work force to agriculture diminished and its share of the Nation's jobs declined, some fundamental changes occurred in the nature of agricultural employment.

Occupation. The term "agricultural ladder" was once used to describe the desired progression from hired hand to tenant farmer to owner-operator. But as agriculture has changed—to consist of fewer, larger farms, which require large capital outlays—the likelihood of this type of advancement has diminished.

Most agricultural workers can be classified into two major groups of approximately equal size: farmers and farm managers, and farm laborers and supervisors.

They account for more than 80 percent of agricultural employment. As agriculture has become more specialized and as the individual farm involves more resources, the managerial function has grown. Occupational support services include cropdusting, animal breeding, and veterinary medicine, as well as a variety of other jobs, such as sales and office work. The percentage of those in this "other" category grew markedly during 1972-80, from 11.6 to 18.3 percent.⁷ This jump relates to the expanded use of agricultural services and the decline in the number of farms and farmers, as the following percentages suggest:

	1972	1980
Total	100	100
Farmers	48	44
Farm laborers (wage)	26	27
Farm laborers (unpaid family workers)	13	9
Farm managers	1	1
Supervisors	1	1
Other (cropdusters, veterinarians, and so forth)	12	18

Farms and farmers. The number of farms declined by 3.25 million since 1950, with the largest decrease—1.7 million—occurring between 1950 and 1960. A drop of 1 million occurred in the 1960's, followed by 0.5 million more in the 1970's. (See table 2.) As the number of farms decreased, their average size increased. This, combined with several sociological and economic factors has resulted in a different proportional makeup in the class of worker categories—wage or salary workers, self-employed, and unpaid family workers—in the industry.

Family farms still predominate, though there is an increase in the number of corporate farms, as family or individually owned farms incorporate for economic or legal reasons.⁸ Also, many family or individually owned farms are dominated by agribusiness because the producers contract with these firms before production begins.⁹

Since 1950, the number of wage and salary workers declined by 0.25 million, but the wage and salary share of total agricultural employment increased from 23 to

42 percent. Over the same period, the number of self-employed dropped by 2.7 million, from 61 to 49 percent of agricultural employment. Farm incorporations, in which farm owners are transformed into wage and salary workers, partially account for these changes.

The number of unpaid family workers in 1980 is about one-third of what it was in 1950, and these workers now constitute 9 percent of agricultural employment. The largest decline occurred in the last 10 years, as many women moved into paid occupations.

Hours of work. As is generally well-recognized, agricultural workers tend to put in more hours than other employees; in 1980, their workweek averaged 45.1 hours, versus 38.3 hours for nonagricultural workers. For those with full-time jobs, the comparable workweeks were 53.3 and 42.5 hours. As shown in the following tabulation, more than 40 percent of agricultural workers spend 49 hours or more at work in their primary job, compared with fewer than 15 percent of nonagricultural workers:

Workweek	Wage and salary		
	All agriculture	Agriculture	Non-agriculture
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
1 to 34 hours	29.9	30.6	24.5
35 to 48 hours	28.1	36.6	62.7
49 hours or more	41.9	32.9	12.9

One reason for these differences is that agricultural workers are more likely to be self-employed, and the latter have always put in longer hours than wage and salary workers, a factor that skews the hours distribution. Nevertheless, even among wage and salary workers, full-time agricultural workers averaged 49.1 hours, compared with 42.1 hours for persons in nonagricultural jobs.

Multiple jobholding. An interesting characteristic of agricultural employment is the high incidence of multiple jobholding. In 1980, about 5 percent of all workers held two jobs or more, and of this group, 19 percent held one job or more in agriculture.

Farmers and farm managers reported a frequent need to moonlight. Because agricultural product prices fluctuate and consequently farm income varies, holding a second job stabilizes the income for those employed in agriculture and has allowed many to remain in agriculture when their farm income alone may have been inadequate. The median workweek, in May 1980, for moonlighting agricultural workers (60 hours) is substantially longer than that of workers in nonagricultural industries (49 hours). Moonlighters who are self-employed in agriculture work a particularly long week, averaging 68 hours, compared with 51 hours for wage and salary workers.

Table 2. Comparison of employed agricultural workers and the number of farms, annual averages, selected years, 1930-80

[In thousands]

Year	Workers ¹	Farms
1930	10,340	6,295
1940	9,540	6,102
1950	7,160	5,388
1960	5,458	3,962
1970	3,462	2,954
1980	3,310	2,428

¹ Data for 1950 forward relate to persons 16 years and over; all other data relate to persons 14 years and over.

Table 3. Comparison of employed agricultural workers and the hired farm working force by geographic region, annual averages, selected years, 1960-80

[In thousands]

Year	United States		Northeast		North Central region		South		West	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Employed agricultural workers										
1960 ¹	5,723	100.0	426	7.4	2,016	35.2	2,425	42.4	856	15.0
1970	3,462	100.0	299	8.6	1,377	39.8	1,248	36.0	538	15.5
1975	3,390	100.0	302	8.9	1,311	38.7	1,214	35.8	563	16.6
1979	3,298	100.0	261	7.9	1,209	36.6	1,202	36.4	627	19.0
1980	3,314	100.0	272	8.2	1,241	37.4	1,161	35.0	640	19.3
Hired farm working force¹										
1960	3,693	100.0	295	8.0	679	18.4	2,088	56.5	630	17.1
1970	2,488	100.0	241	9.7	590	23.7	1,093	43.9	564	22.7
1975	2,639	100.0	227	8.6	674	25.5	1,074	40.7	664	25.2
1979	2,651	100.0	188	7.1	785	29.6	1,071	40.4	607	22.9

¹ Data relate to persons 14 years and over; all other data relate to persons 16 years and over. Data have been collected biennially since 1977.

Seasonality. The seasonal nature of agriculture and its dependence on weather, combined with the high perishability of the product, makes agriculture unique. Employment in agriculture varies from season to season and the difference in employment between summer and winter months is sharpest for farm laborers and supervisors, as chart 1 shows. As would be expected, employment of farmers and farm managers and of agricultural service workers is more stable.

Hired farm work force

Size decreases. The size of the hired farm working force declined from an average of 3.6 million in the 1950's to 3.2 million in the 1960's and has been fairly steady at 2.7 million in recent years.¹⁰

Contributing to the drop has been the slackening of demand for labor as mechanization has eliminated many harvesting tasks. Some estimates have been made of the number of jobs lost to certain labor-saving devices. For example, the National Rural Center reported that the mechanization of the cotton harvester displaced approximately 4 million people between 1945 and 1965, and similarly, there was an estimated loss of more than 30,000 tomato harvesting jobs between 1966 and 1970 because of mechanical harvesters. Substantial job losses have been predicted in the tobacco industry because of mechanization in the flu-cured tobacco belt.¹¹

There are many reasons for individual farmers to adopt new technology, with long-term cost savings being the primary motivating force. The uncertainty of the available supply of agricultural workers has also been a factor in the decision to mechanize, because farmers wish to minimize the risk of losing a crop because of a possible shortage of harvest workers. Thus, there can be a circular relationship between declines in agricultural employment and increased mechanization. When farmers invest in labor-saving technology, this reduces the aggregate number of available jobs, which in turn, in-

duces hired farmworkers to seek nonagricultural employment, diminishing the labor supply further and continuing the cycle.¹²

Job attachment. The hired farm work force includes many people who spend only a fraction of the year doing farmwork. The following tabulation classifies the percentage of hired farmworkers in 1979 by number of days worked:

	<i>Workers</i>
Total hired farm work force	100
Casual (25 days or less)	34
Seasonal (25 to 149 days)	37
Regular (150 to 249 days)	13
Permanent (250 days or more)	16

Seventy percent of the hired farm working force worked less than 150 days in 1979. This type of job may be ideal for those interested in part time, sporadic employment but frustrating for those who need to piece together several jobs to maintain a steady source of income.

Since the 1950's, there has been an increase in the number of casual workers, with slight declines recorded in the other categories.

The limited job attachment to the hired farm working force, in general, can be discerned through an examination of the primary labor force activities of this group. Almost half considered themselves to be out of the labor force. Less than 30 percent reported farmwork as their major activity of the year, and about 20 percent thought of nonfarm employment as their primary status. About three-fourths of those who did farmwork, but generally considered themselves out of the labor force, were students; most of the remainder were housewives.

Overall, Hispanics appear to have the strongest tie to farmwork. They tend to be less educated and less experienced in other work, so they are more dependent on

farmwork for employment opportunities.

The educational attainment of the hired farm working force is quite low compared with other workers. Educational levels are particularly low among minorities, as the median number of years of study completed was only 5.4 for Hispanics and 7.7 for blacks. Because education is a significant factor in occupational mobility, a lack of schooling often makes it difficult for minorities to leave this occupation. Thus, they spend a much longer time in hired farmwork, as the percent distribution for 1977 shows:

	All workers	Whites	Hispanics	Blacks and others
Less than 5 years	53	60	36	35
5 to 10 years	22	21	19	20
11 to 20 years	11	10	17	17
20 years or more	9	4	12	18
Not reported	6	5	10	10

The effects of time

The characteristics of the hired farm working force have changed over the years, with the most significant differences occurring in racial composition, regional distribution, and residence. In 1950, blacks and other races composed about 29 percent, this increased to 37 percent

in 1960, and then declined sharply to 22 percent in 1970 and to 13 percent in 1979. Hispanics have accounted for 11 to 12 percent of the hired farm working force since 1975, the first year data for Hispanics were tabulated.

The decline in the hired farm working force has been sharpest in the South, where the number dropped by 1 million between 1960 and 1970. Since 1970, the number of farmworkers in the South has stabilized, while there has been an increase in the North Central region. (See table 3.) The differences in the regional distribution of farmworkers between the Hired Farm Working Force series and annual averages from the Current Population Survey reflect dissimilarities in the crops grown and in the types of farming operations. The use of hired farmworkers tends to be more prevalent where irrigation is extensive, where fruits and vegetables are the leading crops, and in plantation and ranching areas where farming units have always been larger than can be handled by a single family.¹³

Another change has been the decline in the proportion who live on farms. In 1979, over 80 percent of the hired farm work force had nonfarm residences, compared with about 70 percent a decade earlier, and 35 percent more than 40 years ago.

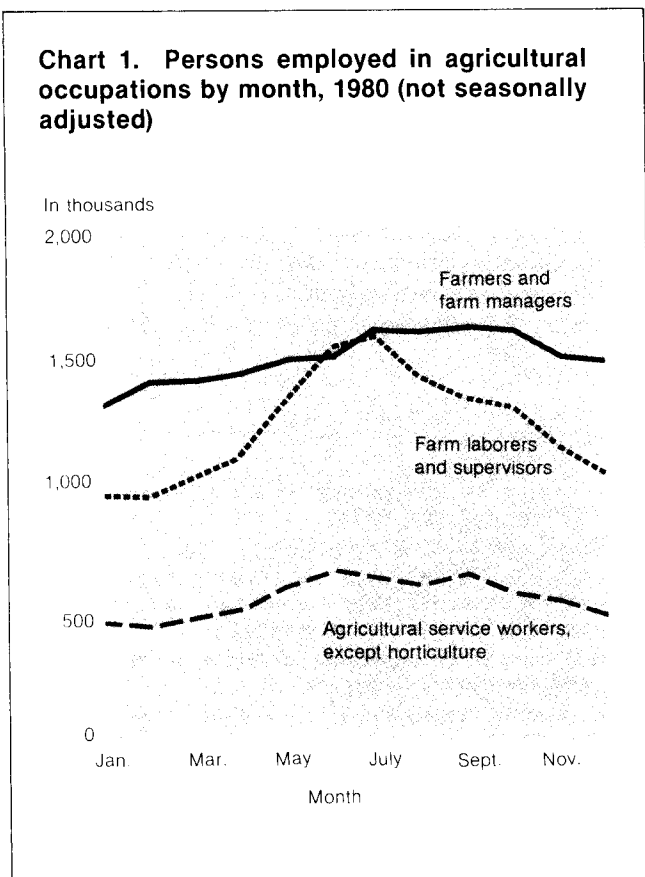
The percentage of women in the hired farm working force has ranged from 21 to 30 percent in the last 35 years and was 22 percent in 1979. Among women, there has been a sharp increase in the proportion of students and a decline among homemakers.¹⁴

The average age for hired farmworkers differs between races. Whites were the youngest, 63 percent were ages 14 to 24, compared with 37 percent for Hispanics, and 40 percent of blacks. This reflects the many white students who perform farmwork temporarily, while for minority members it remains a career.

Migrant workers. Migrant farmworkers, defined as those who leave their home county overnight and work in another one at some time during the year, are a small subset of the hired farm work force. These workers, though few numerically, attract considerable attention because of their living conditions.

The number of migrant workers was close to 200,000 throughout the 1970's, a decline from 400,000 in 1960. Although they accounted for only 7 to 8 percent of the work force in the 1970's, migrant workers have fulfilled a significant need in agriculture. Mechanization has not spread at an even rate across production, particularly in the harvesting phase and some crops will always have to be handpicked because of their delicate nature. The availability of migrant farmworkers is a factor which has allowed increased crop specialization. Without them, farmers would be limited to the local labor supply and might have to stagger the harvesting times of

Chart 1. Persons employed in agricultural occupations by month, 1980 (not seasonally adjusted)



crops, losing the economic advantages of specialization. It has also been suggested that the availability of migrant workers saves a large amount of U.S. agricultural production that would otherwise be lost in spoilage.¹⁵

The migrant labor force in 1979 was predominantly male; only one-fourth was female. The migrant men tend to be slightly older than the men in the total hired farm working force, whereas migrant women are somewhat younger. Blacks and Hispanics contribute disproportionately to the migrant labor supply, although the majority are white. The largest proportion of migrant workers have their home base in the South (40 percent), followed by the West (29 percent), and North Central (26 percent) regions. Fewer than 6 percent are found in the Northeast.

Many migrants travel long distances to work, though the extent varies by region of origin. Most of the migrants begin their travels in the South, and these migrants travel the farthest, as almost 40 percent record over 1,000 miles in a season. In the West and North Central regions, the majority of the workers travel less than 500 miles, as do nearly all the migrants from the Northeast. Thus, it appears that there is a sizable group of migrants, presumably originating in the South, who follow the crops over long distances, while other migrants remain relatively close to home.

The employment future

The U.S. agricultural system is considered to be the most efficient and productive in the world. Productivity continues to increase,¹⁶ although opinion varies as to whether the tremendous biological, chemical, and mechanical advances of the last few decades can persist. The complexity and scale of modern agriculture may pose prohibitive costs in realizing further substantial productivity gains.¹⁷

It is possible that some sort of lower limit on the number of agricultural workers is being approached.

The recent stabilization of the total agricultural labor force and the hired farm working force suggest this. Also, the decline in agricultural employment has been less than was projected by BLS in the early 1970's. It was then expected to drop at a rate of almost 5 percent annually between 1972 and 1980;¹⁸ the actual rate of decrease has been much less.

The decline was forecast because productivity was expected to rise more than demand. However, the former rose less than expected (3.7 percent actual versus 6.1 percent projected) and the latter increased more than anticipated (1.5 percent rather than the projected 0.5 percent annual increase). Rising exports, which have more than doubled in quantity in the past 10 years, partially account for the growth in demand.¹⁹ More recent projections of farm jobs anticipate an annual decline of 1.5 percent between 1980 and 1985 and a 2.3-percent decrease between 1985 and 1990 in a low-growth scenario; and an 0.7-percent increase between 1980 and 1985; followed by a drop of 2.1 percent annually between 1985 and 1990 in the high-growth model.²⁰

The questions now are whether the 1980's will bring another round of technological advances and whether the international demand for agricultural products will continue to rise. The effect of these two forces will determine in part the future size of the agricultural labor force.

Overall, it is difficult to predict what will happen in agriculture and its employment. There is a growing concern that all the changes in the structure of agriculture have not been positive. Some serious problems with erosion and soil depletion, debt burden, and obstacles to entry have surfaced. Research is being done on intermediate technology, organic farming, and small farm viability, and some data suggest that smaller farms are more efficient, productive, and innovative.²¹ As the fear of economic and environmental problems in agriculture increases, these options may become more important. □

FOOTNOTES

¹ James S. Holt, "Introduction to the Seasonal Farm Labor Problem" in Robert D. Emerson, ed., *Seasonal Agricultural Labor Markets in the United States*, preliminary report submitted to the Department of Labor, September 1980, pp. 4 and 5.

² The term "blacks" refers to all persons in the survey other than whites. In addition to blacks, the group includes American Indians, Alaskan natives, Asians, and Pacific Islanders. Data on persons of Hispanic ethnicity are collected independently of racial data. In the 1970 census, approximately 96 percent of their population was white.

³ *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970, Bicentennial Edition, Part 2* (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1975), p. 465. The term "farm operator" is used to designate a person who operates a farm, either doing the work himself or directly supervising the job. This person may be the owner, a member of the owner's household; a salaried manager; or a tenant, renter, or sharecropper.

⁴ *Farm Population of the United States: 1979*, Series P-27, No. 53

(U.S. Bureau of the Census, jointly with U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1980), p. 5; and later reports.

⁵ *Historical Statistics of the United States: 1979*, p. 127.

⁶ *Changes in Farm Production and Efficiency, 1978* (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economics, Statistics, and Cooperative Service), Bulletin 628, p. 57 and later preliminary estimates.

⁷ 1972 was used for comparison, because consistent occupational data are not available for prior years.

⁸ B. Delworth Gardner and Rulon D. Pope, "How is Scale and Structure Determined in Agriculture?" *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, May 1978, p. 299.

⁹ Al Krebs, "From Seedling to Supermarket: Vertical Integration in the Food Industry" in Kenneth M. Coughlin, ed., *Perspectives on the Structure of American Agriculture, Volume II: Federal Farm Policies* (Washington, D.C., Rural America, 1980), p. 44; and Ann

Crittenden, "More and More Conglomerate Links in U.S. Food Chain." *The New York Times*, February 1, 1981, p. E-3.

¹⁰ Data for the hired farm working force was obtained from the *Hired Farm Working Force of 1977* (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economics, Statistics and Cooperative Service, 1979), Agricultural Economic Report No. 437, unpublished data from 1979 and earlier reports in the series. The data had been collected annually in December through 1977 but are now collected only every other year, that is 1979, 1981.

¹¹ Heather Tischbein, "Science in Whose Interest? A Look at the Beneficiaries of Agricultural Research," *Federal Farm Policies*, p. 41.

¹² For a technical discussion of this relationship, see David Zillerman and Richard A. Just, "Labor Supply Uncertainty and Technology Adoption" in Robert D. Emerson, ed., *Seasonal Agricultural Labor Markets in the United States*, preliminary report submitted to the Department of Labor, September 1980.

¹³ Holt, "Seasonal Farm Labor," pp. 9-10.

¹⁴ Benjamin N. Matta, "Employment and Earnings Outcomes in the Hired Farmworker Market" (prepared for the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, 1980).

¹⁵ Alice Larson, "Last and Still Least: Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers in U.S. Agriculture" in Kenneth M. Coughlin, ed., *Perspectives on the Structure of American Agriculture, Volume I: The View From the Farm*, p. 22.

¹⁶ *Changes in Farm Production and Efficiency*, and later preliminary estimates.

¹⁷ Willard W. Cochrane, *The Development of American Agriculture: A Historical Analysis* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1979), p. 329.

¹⁸ Ronald E. Kutscher, "Projections of GNP, income, output, and employment," *Monthly Labor Review*, December 1973, pp. 27-42.

¹⁹ *Agricultural Statistics*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1980, p. 561, and later preliminary estimates.

²⁰ The farm jobs projections are based on productivity and output projections for agriculture. For more detail, see Valerie A. Personick, "The outlook for industry output and employment through 1990," *Monthly Labor Review*, August 1981, pp. 28-41.

²¹ Frances Moore Lappé and Joseph Collins with Cary Fowler, *Food First: Beyond the Myth of Scarcity* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977), pp. 155-8, 162.

A note on communications

The *Monthly Labor Review* welcomes communications that supplement, challenge, or expand on research published in its pages. To be considered for publication, communications should be factual and analytical, not polemical in tone. Communications should be addressed to the Editor-in-Chief, *Monthly Labor Review*, Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Washington, D.C. 20212.
