



## The Growing Role of H-2A Workers in U.S. Agriculture

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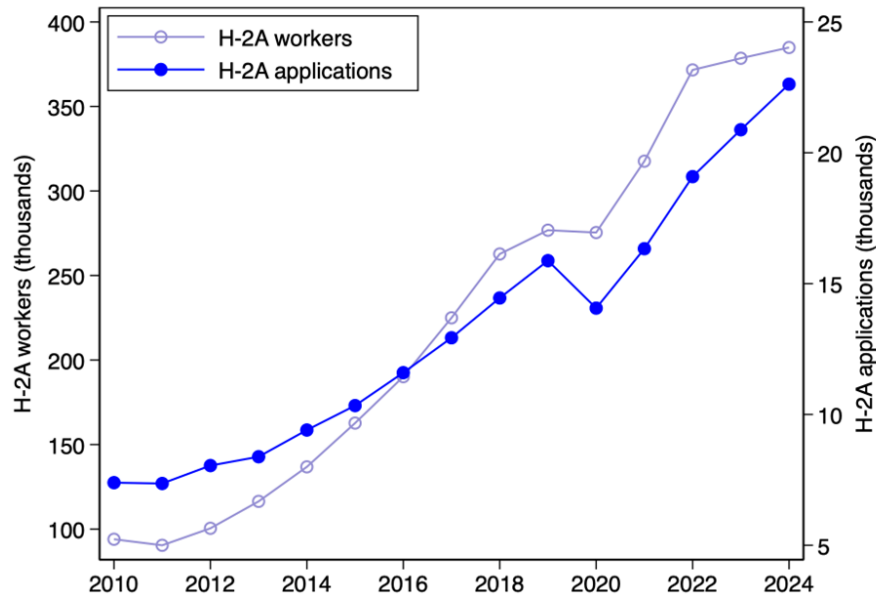
The H-2A program allows eligible employers in the U.S. an avenue to request and hire foreign workers to fill temporary agricultural jobs. Applicants must be certified and demonstrate a lack of willing, qualified, and available U.S. workers to fill the temporary roles and that the wages and working conditions available to similarly employed U.S. workers will not be adversely affected ([USCIS, 2025](#)).

The program plays a critical role in addressing seasonal and temporary labor needs in U.S. agriculture. In 2024, more than 380,000 workers were authorized under this program—a 300% increase from 2010, when only 94,000 workers participated (Figure 1, left axis). This growth reflects both rising demand for labor and an increase in employer applications, which more than tripled over the same period from almost 7,400 to over 22,600 (Figure 1, right axis). H-2A workers now account for 15% of employment on U.S. crop farms ([Castillo, Martin, and Rutledge, 2024](#)).

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**Figure 1. Trends in H-2A Workers and Applications, 2010-2024**



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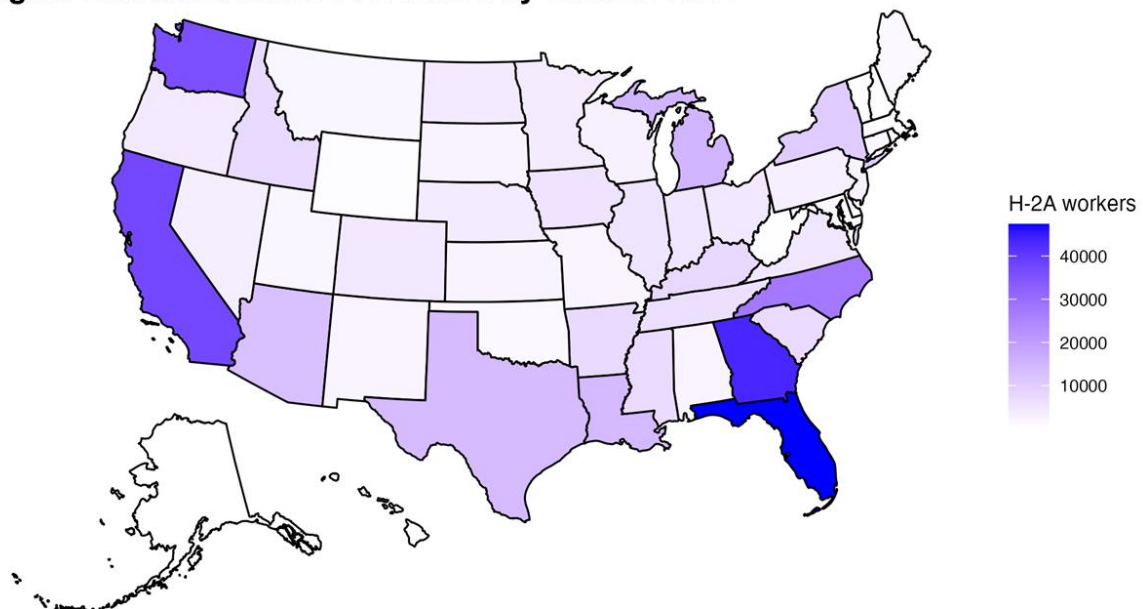
Sources: Office of Foreign Labor Certification, US Department of Labor

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## H-2A Use by State

Farms in all states across the U.S. utilize the H-2A program. Most authorized H-2A workers are concentrated in Florida, Georgia, California, and Washington—states with labor-intensive crops such as fruits and vegetables (see Figure 2). Applications provide another measure of program use and are submitted by farms requesting varying numbers of workers per application. Application numbers tend to be the largest in states like Texas, Louisiana, and North Dakota (see Figure 3) but requests are for smaller numbers of workers per application compared with the leading authorized worker areas. The worker and application numbers illustrate the regional variation in labor needs associated with the diverse agricultural operations across the U.S.

**Figure 2. Authorized H-2A Workers by State in 2024**

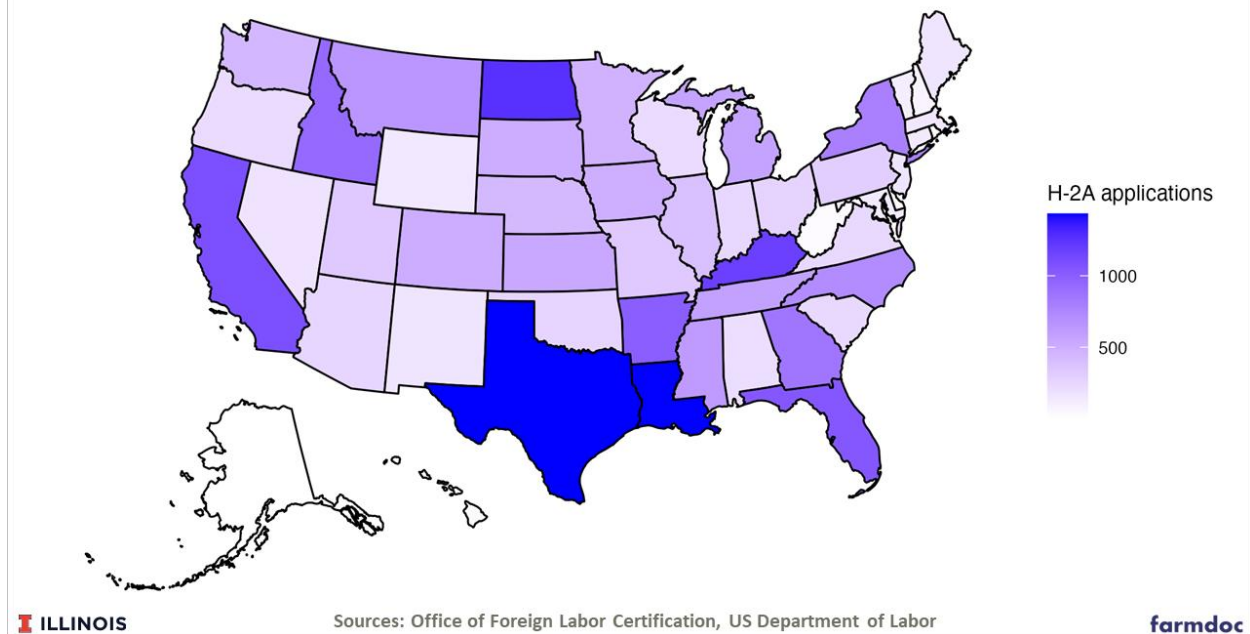


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Sources: Office of Foreign Labor Certification, US Department of Labor

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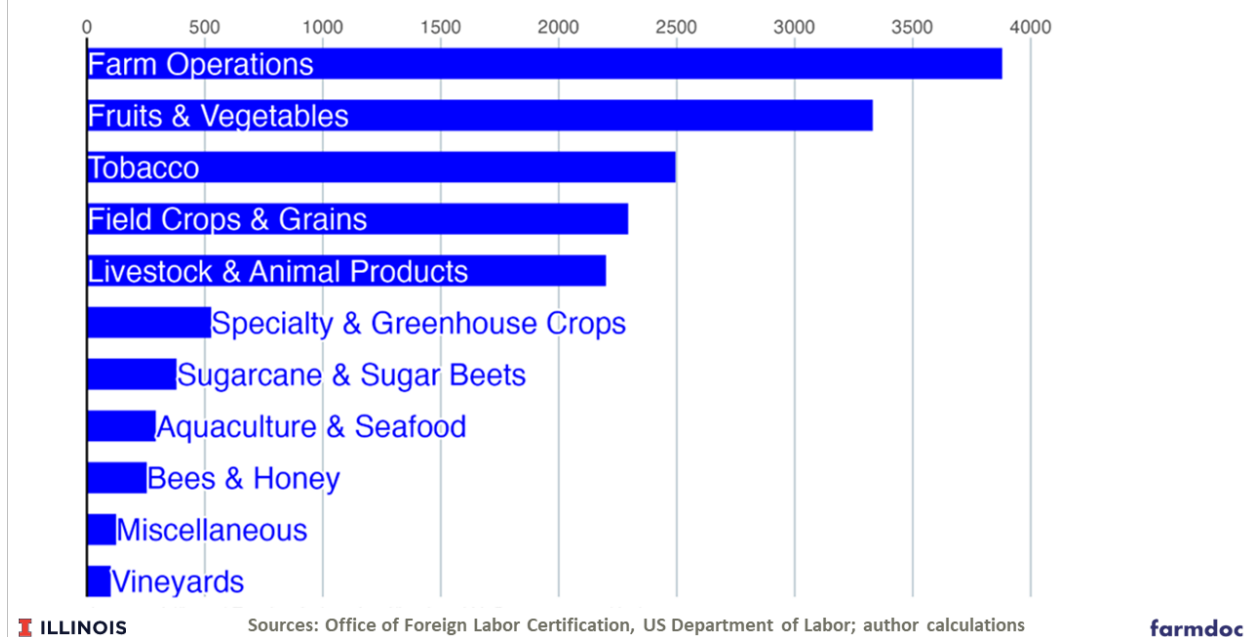
**Figure 3. H-2A Applications by State in 2024**



### Farm Types Supported by H-2A Workers

As of 2019, most H-2A workers were employed in roles reported or classified as general operations such as equipment operation. These were followed by roles in fruit and vegetable production, tobacco cultivation, field crops, and livestock management (see Figure 4). The variety of the farm types and roles stress the program's importance for a range of agricultural activities.

**Figure 4. H-2A Applications by Farm Type in 2019**



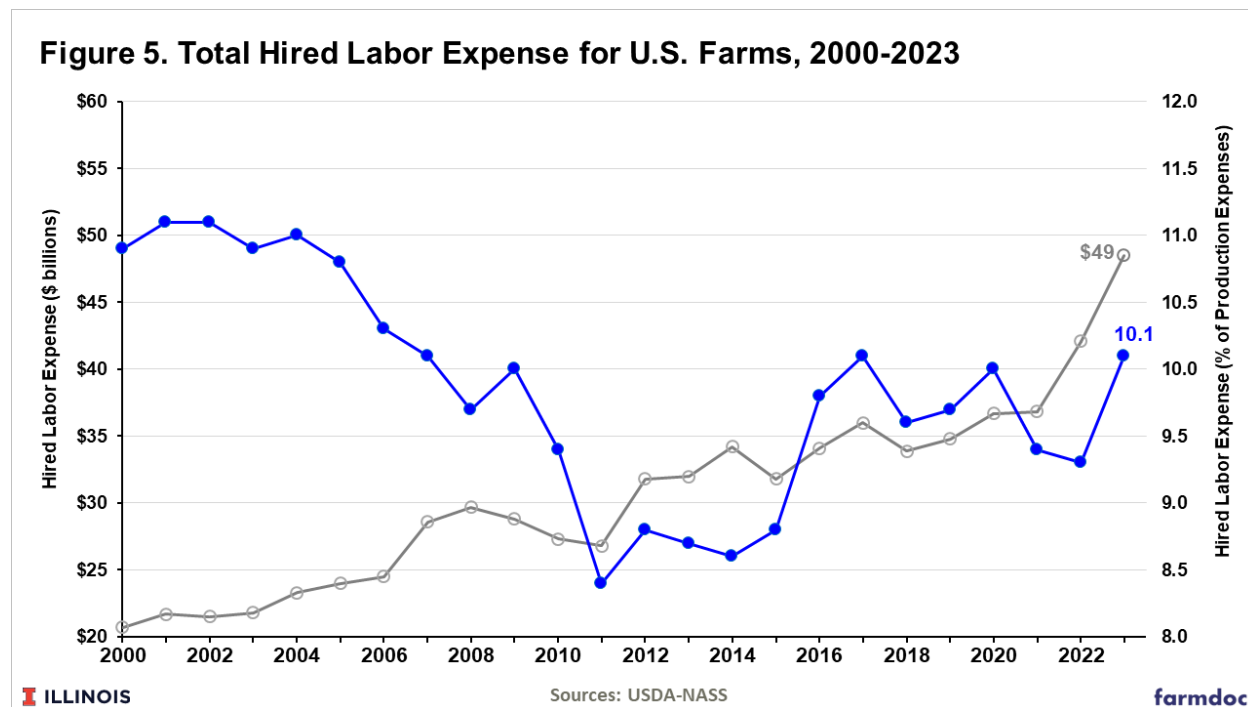
### Policy Challenges and Opportunities

The sustained growth in the number of H-2A workers over the years is a clear indication of growing demand for, and constraints on, labor in the agricultural sector. While this demand is more heavily concentrated in some states, there is a broad demand for foreign workers all over the U.S. Similarly, there

are niche crops that use H-2A workers highlighting the opportunity to increase the production of some specialty crops nationwide with access to foreign temporary workers.

Labor expenses on U.S. farms have become an increasing concern in recent years. Total hired labor expense increased from just over \$20 billion in 2000 to nearly \$49 billion in 2023 (Figure 5, left axis). The average compound annual growth rate from 2000 to 2021 was 2.8%. Hired labor cost increases have been even more pronounced since 2021, increasing by 14.4% from 2021 to 2022 and by 15.2% from 2022 to 2023.

While hired labor costs represented a declining share of total production expenses on U.S. farms during the 2000s, the cost share has been increasing since 2011 reaching 10.1 percent in 2023 (Figure 5, right axis). This indicates that labor costs have generally been rising at a faster rate than average production costs over the past decade.



Employers face substantial direct and indirect costs when using the H-2A program (Castillo, Martin, and Rutledge, 2024). The costs include, but are not limited to, the provision of housing, meals and compliance with Adverse Effect Wage Rates (AEWR) which vary by state. While costs associated with using the program are increasing for all farms, large farms may be better equipped to cover the fixed costs and administrative burden associated with the program due to economies of scale. In contrast, rising costs disproportionately impact smaller farms which may struggle even more to participate in the program to meet their seasonal labor needs (Ayoub, 2025). Understanding the differential costs for small and big farms could provide options for improvement in the H-2A program. Improved access to a qualified labor force, including immigrant seasonal workers, can improve productivity and competitiveness to strengthen the resilience of the US agricultural sector.

## References

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**Figure Notes:** The number of workers reported in Figure 1 is the total number of authorized workers in the H-2A program in each fiscal year while the number of applications is the total number of applications submitted regardless of their approval status in each fiscal year. In 2024, the approval rate was 98%. Figure 4 classifies primary crops into 11 categories. Farm operations include drivers, general farm workers, agricultural equipment operators, cooks and others. The miscellaneous category includes silage, peanuts, pecans, nuts, almonds, clovers and others.