

PA Milk Marketing Board
Carol A. Hardbarger

Immigrants in Pennsylvania and the Dairy Workforce Workforce

Dairy farmers across the commonwealth employ immigrant labor to an extent that most citizens do not realize. In general, the agriculture industry is heavily dependent on immigrant labor, which makes up 18 percent of Pennsylvania's workforce in the areas of farming, fishing and forestry (US Census Bureau, 2018). The Census Bureau also reported that 2 percent of Pennsylvania's total workforce consisted of undocumented migrants.

This doesn't sound like much, but when you consider the dairy industry use of immigrant labor the figure is much higher. A 2017 national study conducted by Texas A & M University found that over 50 percent of the nation's dairy workforce is made up of foreign-born workers, many of them undocumented. Loss of even a relatively small portion of them through immigration law changes would create a serious burden on dairy farmers. Citing the worst-case scenario, a loss of all this workforce would cost \$32 billion and a loss of 208,000 jobs.

We don't have to go outside of Pennsylvania to understand the issues surrounding dairy farm labor shortages, and a look at our 13th Congressional District (Blair, Bedford, Huntingdon, Fulton, Franklin and Adams Counties and portions of Somerset, Westmoreland, Cambria and Cumberland Counties) can provide a snapshot of the problem.

Dairy farmers there report that finding the "typical American worker" to perform the types of manual labor tasks needed on the farm, including milking, feeding and caring for the cows, is very difficult. These sentiments are echoed throughout the state and country and are also vocalized by those in other non-seasonal agriculture areas such as mushroom farming.

Congressman John Joyce, who represents the district, partnered with Congressman Anthony Brindisi of upstate New York to introduce legislation in spring 2019 as a result of concerns raised by their constituents and other dairy industry businesses. The legislation they introduced was a change to the H-2A visa program to allow its use by dairy farmers—the program previously only issued visas to seasonal workers. As a response to COVID-19, H-2A was amended in 2020 to allow issuance of year-round dairy farm worker visas. Both Joyce and Brindisi have been praised by their constituents for listening and acting on the problem.

Dairy farmers are not the only segment of the dairy industry to report issues with the workforce. I conducted a survey of Pennsylvania's dairy processors in late fall 2019 in which most of them indicated that finding workers is an ongoing issue they face.

Why does this matter? It is all part of a much larger picture surrounding agriculture and immigrant labor. Some sections of our economy, such as the dairy industry, are heavily dependent on immigrant labor, but there are also overall economic benefits from this special workforce that are not widely known.

The American Immigration Council reports that 1 in 14 Pennsylvania residents is an immigrant (approximately 918,000 people). Pennsylvania residents in immigrant-headed households had \$24.6 billion in spending power (after-tax income) in 2018. Even the undocumented immigrants contributed to the economy through paying an estimated \$418 million in federal taxes and \$238 million in state and local taxes, also in 2018.

The Board is supportive of immigration law initiatives that will allow dairy industry farms and related businesses to secure capable and reliable employees, willing to do the necessary jobs and ensure that consumers can purchase fresh, safe fluid milk and other dairy products. This is a position that circumvents politics to serve our constituent groups—farmers, processors, retailers and consumers—in the best way.

PMMB is always available to respond to questions and concerns. I can be reached at 717-210-8244 or by email at chardbarga@pa.gov.