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# Demand surges for Mexican laborers

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Demand for temporary laborers under the H-2A agricultural visa program is up 20 percent for the first nine months of the fiscal year, according to the U.S. Labor Department.

Since the beginning of the fiscal year on Oct. 1, the labor department certified more than 160,000 temporary workers, with the bulk of the being from Mexico, to harvest agricultural crops such as berries and tobacco — an increase of 20 percent from the year prior.

Farmers, facing a shortage of skilled laborers, have complained about the onerous requirements of the H-2A program, including the need to provide food, housing and transportation for seasonal workers.

Nonetheless, the program has become a crucial element for the U.S. agriculture industry, as evidenced by the 165,741 H-2A visas issued in 2016, up from 85,248 in 2012.

Steve Scaroni, founder of Fresh Harvest, a labor provider, staffing company and harvest company for the leafy greens and berry industries, whose family has been involved in farming in California since the early 1900s, was quoted in *The Wall Street Journal* as saying that while “extremely burdensome,” cutting the H-2A program would “bring the industry to its knees. Within a week, there wouldn’t be a salad in the store.”

As the United States, Canada and Mexico get set to start renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement, it is likely that the professional visa program will be part of the talks, according to Ildelfonso Guajardo, economic minister for Mexico. However, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue said recently that NAFTA discussions wouldn’t specifically address U.S. growers’ concerns

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about labor.

President Trump and Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto agreed in early July to look into new ways to allow Mexican guest workers into the United States, but did not commit to expanding the existing visa programs.

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