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Growers face labor shortage as U.S. workers seek alternative jobs

By

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A critical issue is plaguing Washington state's agricultural industry: a shrinking domestic workforce. According to a recent report by the [National Farmers Union](#), the number of U.S. farmworkers has declined by 5 percent since 2018, with particularly sharp drops in key fruit-producing states like Washington.



This trend is causing significant challenges for growers in the Evergreen State, known for its bountiful apple, cherry and pear harvests. Washington's agricultural sector heavily relies on migrant labor to fill the gap left by the dwindling domestic workforce. However, factors such as stricter immigration regulations and competition from other industries offering better wages and working conditions are making it harder for farmers to secure this crucial labor source.

As reported by The [Tri-City Herald](#), Washington Congressman Dan Newhouse, a vocal advocate for the state's agricultural industry, has proposed a plan to address the labor shortage. His proposal focuses on streamlining the H-2A visa program, which allows farmers to hire temporary foreign workers for seasonal jobs. The program has been criticized for its complexity and bureaucracy, deterring some farmers from utilizing it.

The Department of Labor has previously stated that up 50 percent of the agricultural workforce is undocumented migrant labor. The current H-2A program has protections for domestic labor built into its framework and this presents a particular challenge as this labor pool continues to shrink. The Farmwork Modernization Act is intended to capture more of the undocumented workforce while making the H-2A process itself less cumbersome.

Finding a sustainable solution to the labor shortage is crucial for Washington's agricultural industry, a significant contributor to the state's economy. The industry generates over \$40 billion annually and employs tens of thousands of people across various sectors. Without a readily available workforce, the future of Washington's fruit production and the livelihoods of those who depend on it could be at risk.

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