

Who will pick our fruit?

Immigrant crackdown might bite the hands that feed us



SEAN SIMMERS, The Patriot-News

Daniel Rama of Mexico is one of about a dozen migrant workers employed at Kay Hollabaugh's farm in Adams County.

BY FORD TURNER
Of The Patriot-News

Getting apples, strawberries and green beans from plants and into hungry mouths was an acquired profession for Kay Hollabaugh.

Her father was a schoolteacher. Her mother worked in school food programs. After college, Hollabaugh managed an office for orthopedic physicians.

Her marriage to a farm employee changed

everything.

Growing and selling fruit in Adams County has become her life's work. Hollabaugh is a manager at Hollabaugh Brothers, a 500-acre fruit farm and market on Route 34 just north of Biglerville. And this spring, even as the orderly rows of trees and plants that stitch the undulating hills become flush with foliage and the promise of a tasty harvest, Hollabaugh is worried.

Will there be enough hands to pick the fruit?

The number of migrant workers flowing into Adams County has declined over the years. The farm run by the Hollabaugh family employed 19 Mexicans and Haitians last year. She said she has seen signs there might be a shortage of workers this year.

"Do you want to eat?" she asked. "Well, then you better be willing to let these people who are willing to do this work stay here and do it."

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WORKERS: Adams County farms miss hands

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About 45,500 migrant and seasonal farm workers are employed in Pennsylvania each year. Adams County might have the greatest concentration in the state.

Fruit growers and other employers check official documents like driver's licenses or Social Security cards to verify eligibility for work, but forgeries can help illegal immigrants secure jobs. The presence of an estimated 12 million-plus illegal immigrants in the U.S. has stirred repeated debates in Congress, and the possibility of sweeping immigration reform has chilled the outlook for migrants.

"We have got a head-on collision coming here, where everything is being done to take away workers," said Dave Benner, president of El Visa Orchards in Adams County.

Immigration issues remain

In 2006, President Bush signed into law a bill to construct a 700-mile fence along the border with Mexico to deter illegal immigration. But congressional attempts to create broad immigration reform have stalled over how to deal with illegal immigrants already in the U.S.

U.S. Rep. Todd Platts, a Republican who represents Adams County, said sentiment in his district is overwhelmingly against giving legal status to illegal immigrants. The best approach, he said, would involve border security, an electronic system for employers to verify the legal status of employees, and upgrading the

They live in permanent buildings called camps, which are maintained by employers and inspected by the government. There were 335 camps in Pennsylvania last year, with 79 in Adams County.

A former fruit farm owner said a novice picker might be paid minimum wage, while an experienced picker might make \$500 or even \$700 a week. Hollabaugh said hourly wages paid on her farm for thinning peaches — removing excess fruit from the tree so remaining pieces grow to a healthy size — range from \$8 to \$15. Federal tax, Social Security and other withholdings reduce the net amount.

Prospects for mechanized fruit-farming have brightened. A mechanical device for peach tree work has performed well in limited use. Baugher said moving platforms have been developed to haul apple pickers from tree to tree, eliminating the need for ladders.

"It is very unlikely we will be replacing workers," Baugher said. "We will be making them more efficient and more comfortable."

From office to farm work

Hollabaugh grew up in Arendtsville. After her 1974 graduation from Biglerville High School, she earned a degree in medical practice management and went to work managing doctors' offices.

Her 1977 marriage to Brad Hollabaugh sent her in a new direction. He was one of three sons of Donald Hollabaugh, who with his twin brother, Harold, had started the family fruit-growing



PHOTOS BY SEAN SIMMERS, The Patriot-News

A view of the 500-acre farm of Kay Hollabaugh of Adams County. With a new growing season in full swing, she is worried about the future of her farm because it is hard to find fruit pickers.

Few Adams County residents their age make similar choices. The hard work and long hours of farming have little appeal to many teenagers and recent graduates. Hence, migrant workers are vital to the farms.

Farmers near retirement

Gary Kauffman, whose Sandoe's Fruit Market buys produce from 125 growers in Adams and nearby counties, said many farm owners are approaching retirement.

"They just don't have

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employees, and upgrading the visa programs for temporary workers.

In Pennsylvania, there was no shortage of migrant workers last year, said Jon Weirether, a migrant specialist in the state Department of Labor and Industry. And, he said, it is too early to tell if there will be a shortage this season.

Although food prices are increasing at their fastest rate in 18 years, Tara Baugher, an educator at the Penn State Cooperative Extension office in Gettysburg, said there is no way to say whether a migrant shortage this season would add to food price inflation.

"That's an assumption you really can't make," she said. "The concern would be, it would be very difficult to sustain an agricultural enterprise if you don't have skilled workers."

Migrant workers move from locale to locale, following the availability of work.

the family fruit-growing business in 1955.

Brad Hollabaugh bought a share of the farm and went from employee to part owner in 1980, the year the couple's first child was born.

Kay Hollabaugh wanted to be near her children. She left her career and started working in the farm office, with a baby monitor nearby.

Now, her husband is a leader in the apple industry and involved with farm legislative issues.

Kay Hollabaugh manages the market and runs the finances. Other family members fill out the farm's five-member board of directors.

"She is a very hard worker, no matter what she is working on," said Dick Price, a longtime friend. "She treats people in very complimentary fashion."

Her children, Bruce Hollabaugh, 28, and Ellie Vranich, 24, graduated from Penn State University and work for the farm.

"They just don't have anybody who wants to take over their business, because they don't want to work seven days a week," Kauffman said. "Without the migrant help, we are going to wake up one of these days and find out we don't have anyone to pick the fruit."

For Hollabaugh, that would be a sad day.

She gives piano lessons in her white Cape Cod house near the market. She takes care of her 91-year-old mother, Dorothy Ernst, who still lives in Arendtsville. She has had many roles at Trinity Lutheran Church in Arendtsville, including president of the church council.

But the farm is near the center of her universe. It is unsettling, she said, that so few people choose farming the way she did years ago.

She said, "I am very, very proud of what we do."

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Kay Hollabaugh of Adams County left a job running a medical office during her 20s to help run her family's fruit farm. Her children also work for the farm.

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