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Labor Demand, Productivity and Recruitment Methods Employed for Harvesting the 1992 Strawberry Crop

Agricultural Experiment Station
Oregon State University

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**Labor Demand, Productivity and Recruitment Methods Employed
for Harvesting the 1992 Strawberry Crop**

Introduction

This is the fourth study of farm labor the Agricultural Experiment Station has completed for the Oregon Strawberry Commission. The first was concluded for the 1987 harvest season. The second was completed for the 1989 season and the third for the 1990 harvest. This report covers the 1992 harvest year. The strategy for the studies has been to seek basic information, such as labor demand and productivity, in each survey for the comparison of trends over time. Additional questions are investigated in each survey that are of timely interest to growers and may not be repeated. The report this year will cover information of continuing and special interest.

The 1992 harvest reflects the continued impact of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) on the recruitment and reporting of farm labor. Our rather simple classification system for grouping workers had to be changed since Special Agricultural Workers (SAWs) are legal and not always migrants. Many have brought their families and are living year-round in the state. Others are well on the way toward achieving full U. S. citizenship. The lines have blurred greatly between workers in pre-IRCA times, many of whom were undocumented and who are now picking fruit legally. Some are migrants while others are year-round residents. To be sure, pickers carrying false documents are

part of the state's harvest workforce, but many growers have difficulty distinguishing legal from illegal workers. A new way of grouping workers was used in this study to reflect the reality of changes in the state's post-IRCA harvest workforce. First, growers were asked to estimate the percent of their workforce that was 16 years or older, or less than 16 years old. Then they were asked to give the percent of the work force that was local or migrant, and the percent of U.S. and non-U.S. citizens for each age group.

The strawberry acreage increased from 5,700 to 6,100 acres between 1990 and 1992, but yields declined by nearly 4 1/2 million pounds (to 61 million pounds), according to the Oregon Agricultural Statistics Service. The number of workers employed declined but productivity per worker increased between the 2 years to adjust for fewer workers picking slightly less fruit.

Full implementation of the state's new minimum wage law (to \$4.75 an hour) was in place for the 1992 picking season. Growers had to adjust their piece rate to guarantee the new minimum wage for each worker. The effect of the higher wage is expected to account for part of the shift to more productive workers, since growers had to pay the \$4.75 hourly rate regardless of the pounds of berries each worker picked. The estimated percent of workers who could not make minimum wage, and the percent terminated for that reason, also are reported.

Data for the survey were gathered by self-administered questionnaires mailed to all known commercial strawberry growers in the state. Growers were asked about the number of 1992 acres in production, total pounds of berries harvested and left unharvested, estimated number of worker-days, the age and type of workers employed, recruitment and worker retention activities, percent of the work force who could not meet minimum wage (and the percent terminated for that reason), and planting and harvesting intentions for 1993.

Questionnaire items, marginal frequencies, and other summary statistics are reported in Appendix A. Completion rates are discussed in Appendix B. Methods for estimating the size and productivity of the work force are given in Appendix C.

Results

Estimate of size and productivity of the work force

We estimate that 24,443 workers were required to pick the 1992 strawberry crop. Table 1 shows the frequency breakdown by type of worker.

Table 1. Frequency distribution for types of strawberry workers in Oregon, 1992.

Type of worker	Workers 16 or older	Workers under 16
	%	%
Local workers who are U.S. citizens	14.8	37.7
Local workers who are non- U.S. citizens	24.7	17.0
Workers from other areas who are U.S. citizens	7.2	6.4
Workers from other areas who are non-U.S. citizens	52.2	38.8
Total	(100.0)	(100.0)
(N)	(23,766)	(677)

Workers under 16 years of age made up only 3 percent of the workforce. Only 51 growers reported hiring any. Alien migrants were the largest adult group, making up more than half the total workforce. Local workers who are aliens made up about 25 percent of the workforce, with local U.S. citizens and non local U.S. adults employed at decreasing levels. Productivity levels were calculated only for adult workers. There were too few teen-age workers hired to estimate productivity by type of worker. Productivity levels did not differ greatly among adult workers, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Productivity values for types of adult strawberry workers.

Type of worker	Average number of pounds of strawberries harvested per worker during the 1992 season
Local workers who are U.S. citizens	3,350
Local workers who are non-U.S. citizens	2,205
Workers from other areas who are U. S. citizens	3,215
Workers from other areas who are non-U.S. citizens	3,040
Average	3,110

On average, an adult picker harvested 3,110 pounds of fruit. Since the 1992 and 1990 harvest groups are not same, we are unable to compare differences between worker-groups. A comparison of average yield per picker is a possibility for the total sample. The average 1992 harvest worker picked about 424 more pounds of fruit than the average 1990 picker. Harvests differed somewhat between the two years. Fewer berries were harvested in 1992 but workers spread over more than 400 additional acres that year.

The comparative advantage in 1992 for type of worker on productivity is not great, with only local aliens not quite as productive as the other groups. They may be recent arrivals with less experience in harvest work, as a few

growers have suggested. Part of the answer also may stem from the local or migrant and the citizen or non citizen distinction sought in the questions. The questions were pretested, but response errors might have occurred for responses of the full sample.

Reason for decline in the number of workers

The general decline in the number of workers between 1990 and 1992 stems from several reasons. The year 1990 saw an estimated workforce of 28,186. In 1992 there were an estimated 24,443 workers, a 13 percent reduction. However, acreage levels have fluctuated slightly over the past 5 years, while total pounds of fruit picked generally have decreased. Acreage changes provide a poor explanation for the generally more productive workforce employed today. One reason may be adequate supplies of better pickers. Another may be stricter screening by growers to insure that their workers can make \$4.75 per hour wages on a piecework basis. The shift to labor contractors also may remove much of the uncertainty associated with securing a supply of harvest labor to pick the full harvest season. All of these possibilities require a smaller total workforce to harvest the crop.

The availability of farm workers no longer remains uppermost in the minds of growers in our surveys. For instance, when asked to list their major concerns for the 1993 harvest, 54 percent of the sample mentioned worries about market price. Forty-six percent specified

worker availability while 17 percent noted the costs associated with documentation and government regulations. The latter is about half the percentage reported in that category for the 1990 harvest. Thirteen percent mentioned the effect of the minimum wage law, down from 23 percent in 1990.

Even so, about 10 percent of the workers hired could not make minimum wage on a piece-rate basis, up from the 7 percent in 1990. Three percent were terminated for that reason both years. The figures underscore the advisability for growers to recruit and retain an adequate supply of good pickers, despite the use of labor contractors.

Recruitment of workers

Little has been reported about the methods growers employ to recruit farm workers. Conventional wisdom suggests that fear of labor shortages, IRCA reporting and enforcement requirements, and higher minimum wage levels will lead many to rely on labor contractors to supply qualified labor rather than other traditional recruitment methods.

As we reported in our 1990 study, labor contractors supplied large numbers of local workers. Eighty-eight percent of growers in our sample said they had used labor contractors for that purpose.

The 1990 data indicated that growers rely on several recruitment methods. For example, nearly all growers (99 percent) said they received out-of-state phone solicitations

in which offers to supply workers were made. Ninety-five percent said they had kept in touch with workers who had picked for them previously, and updated them about crop status, working conditions and housing for the 1990 crop. (Fifty-four percent of the growers hire workers who return year after year.) Local newspaper want ads were employed during the picking season by 95 percent of the sample. Ninety-four percent said they sought workers through state employment offices. Employees for 58 percent of the growers recruited workers for their employers. And, 53 percent of the growers said they also hired walk ons. No single recruitment method stood out. Rather, many methods were employed and most were used heavily.

We went beyond these summary figures in 1992 to learn more about the quality of the different recruitment methods. Labor contractors and workers who returned year after year were considered the "best" recruitment methods, accounting for 39 and 31 percent of the sample respectively. Word-of-mouth solicitation by employees was mentioned by 14 percent and walk ons (no recruitment) and newspaper want ads were both considered "best" by 6 percent. (Four percent gave "other" methods.)

However, spot labor shortages occurred for the 1992 picking season as they have for the previous harvests studied. About 1,279 acres were not fully picked (or not picked at all), and an estimated \$3,802,857 was lost because growers said they could not find enough pickers to harvest

all their fruit. This value is twice the dollar loss reported for 1990. Twice as many growers reported fruit losses from inadequate labor supplies compared to 1990. Workers either had left to harvest other fields or had shifted to other crops where picking was more favorable to them. Not surprisingly, growers who reported losses were more likely to worry about adequate labor supplies for the 1993 season than growers who were able to harvest all their fruit.

Retention of Workers

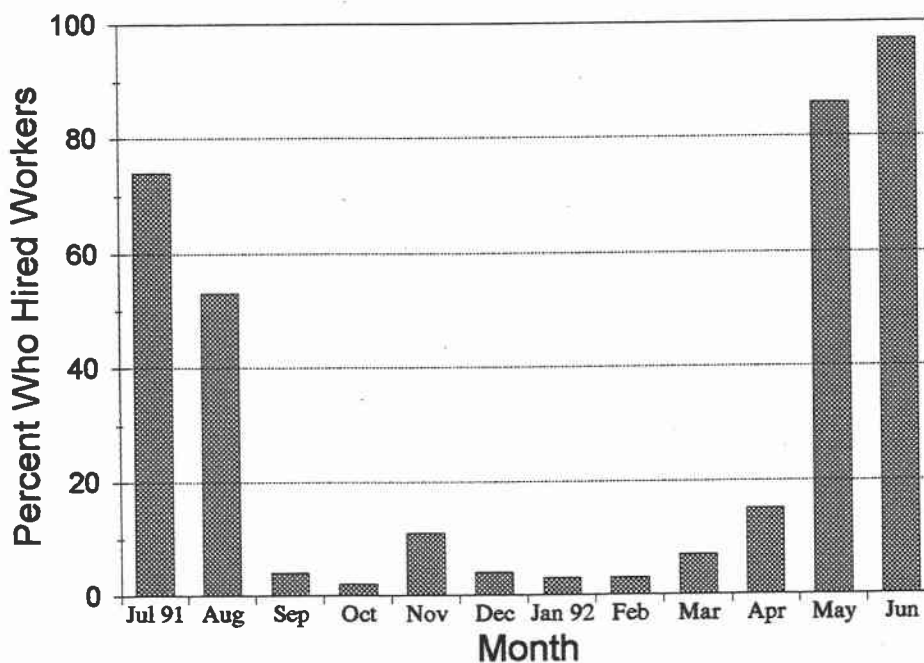
A key to successful strawberry harvest is maintaining an adequate harvest workforce for the duration of the season. Several reasons typically account for diminishing supplies of pickers over the course of the strawberry bearing season, including declining yields per picking (and therefore lower earnings for workers), and start up of harvest activities for other hand harvested crops. We asked employers how they maintained their harvest workforce and found that a variety of methods are used.

Increasing the piece-rate paid for later pickings was by far the most popular method of retaining workers, and was mentioned by 86 percent of growers. About 44 percent of the surveyed growers raise crops that are hand-harvested after strawberry harvest is complete, thus offering their workers longer employment periods as encouragement to stay. Some growers also mentioned on-farm housing as a way of retaining workers. A few used other methods, such as bonuses,

picnics, transportation, and agreements with other growers to provide workers incentives to remain throughout the harvest season.

Growers estimated that 28.5 percent of their harvest labor worked 3 days or less, 22.1 percent worked from 4 days to 1 week, 18.7 percent worked from 1 to 2 weeks, and 30.7 percent worked over 2 weeks. With an average harvest period for all growers of about 16 days and with only 30 percent of workers employed by the same growers for 2 weeks or more, we conclude that worker retention is an area that deserves attention. Given the costs associated with worker turnover (completing employment forms and managing payroll accounting), growers can economically justify costs and efforts associated with worker retention. The majority of growers hire workers in May, June, and July, as illustrated in Figure 1. Over half provided employment in August

Figure 1. Percentage of Growers Who Hired Hand-Harvest Workers.



as well, with very few growers employing strawberry workers from September through April. Because the survey was administered in August of 1992, growers indicated the months they hired hand-harvest labor from July, 1991 to June, 1992. This 1-year time period covers portions of 2 crop years, so caution must be exercised in interpreting the employment period reported. It appears that many growers are diversified and able to offer employment beyond the traditional strawberry harvest season, since few strawberries are harvested in July and August. As employment periods lengthen, opportunities for maintaining an adequate, stable workforce increase. This provides benefits to both workers and growers.

Planting and harvesting intentions for 1993

Growers report that they expected to plant 1,086 acres of strawberries in the spring of 1993, about 18 percent of the total 1992 acreage. They also indicated they planned to harvest about 6,180 acres in 1993, about the same as in 1992.

Summary

This fourth survey of labor demand and productivity sought to estimate farm labor needs of Oregon strawberry growers for 1992 and related information. Through a mail survey of known growers in the state, questions were asked concerning the number of 1992 acres in production, total pounds of berries harvested and left unharvested, estimated

number of picker-days required to harvest the crop, the age and type of worker employed, methods for recruiting and retaining farm workers, and the number of workers who could not make minimum wage picking at piece-rate wages.

The 1992 harvest reflects the continued impact of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) on the recruitment and reporting of farm labor. Our rather simple classification of types of workers employed in the state's strawberry fields was changed to reflect the addition of legal Special Agricultural Workers (SAWs). The lines have blurred between types of pre- and post-IRCA farm labor. Not all are migrants. Many SAWs live in the state year-round. Pickers who carry false documents abound, but the addition of legal, formerly migrant farm labor adds a new dimension to the workforce, although some confusion exists between the identification of legal and illegal farm labor.

Results show that the strawberry acreage increased from 5,600 to 6,100 acres, about 9 percent, between 1990 and 1991, according to the Oregon Agricultural Statistical Service. Fruit production dropped by 8 percent, however, from 59.8 million to 55 million pounds between the 2 years. According to our survey, the number of workers hired to pick berries dropped about 9 percent (from 28,186 in 1990 to 24,444 in 1992).

More than half the adult workforce (52 percent) is made up of alien migrant pickers. Local aliens made up about 25 percent and another 15 percent were local workers who are

U.S. citizens and the remainder (7 percent) are migrants who also are U.S. citizens. Only 3 percent of the workforce was under 16 years of age.

Productivity levels did not differ greatly among types of adult workers. On average they harvested an estimated 3,110 pounds of fruit per worker, about 424 pounds higher than the 1990 adult workforce. The trend for a lower but more productive workforce may stem from adequate supplies of good pickers and greater selectivity by growers to insure that their workers can make \$4.75 an hour on a piece work basis. A shift to labor contractors also may remove much of the uncertainty over securing an adequate supply of workers who will pick the full harvest season.

Growers employed a variety of recruitment methods for attracting farm workers. No single approach seemed to be favored. Labor contractors were used, but not to the extent of personal contact with former workers, contact with state employment offices or use of newspaper want ads. No particular recruitment method was singled out. Rather, many methods were employed and used heavily. Labor contractors and efforts to attract workers to return year after year are considered the "best" retention methods.

Most growers continued the widespread practice of increasing the piece-rate toward the end of harvest to retain workers. Nearly half (44 percent) grow hand-harvested crops after the strawberry harvest is complete,

thereby offering workers longer employment as an incentive to work the full harvest season.

With an average harvest period for all growers of about 16 days and with only 30 percent of workers employed by the same grower for two weeks or more, worker retention is an area that deserves attention. Costs of worker turnover, such as completion of employment forms and management of payroll accounts are not trivial. Growers can economically justify costs and efforts associated with keeping their workers for the full harvest season.

**APPENDIX A: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR 1992 SURVEY OF
STRAWBERRY GROWERS**

1. Did you harvest any strawberries for commercial processing in 1992? (Circle one number)

<u>(N)</u>	<u>PERCENT</u>	
0	0	NO (PLEASE SKIP NOW TO QUESTION 14)
121	100	YES (PLEASE GO ON TO QUESTION 2)

2. How many acres of strawberries did you raise in 1992?

(N = 121) MEAN = 28.50 MIN = 0.2 MAX = 300 SUM = 3,449

3. How many pounds of strawberries did you harvest in 1992?

(N = 113) MEAN = 316,783 MIN = 500 MAX = 3,500,000
SUM = 35,796,459

4. What was the average number of pickers in the field per harvest day? Just your best estimate please.

(N = 118) MEAN = 66.95 MIN = 1 MAX = 700 SUM = 7,900

5. And, how many working days, altogether, did it take to harvest your crop?

(N = 116) MEAN = 16.5 MIN = 1 MAX = 41

6. Considering all your pickers, about what percent would you estimate worked for each of the time periods listed below during your strawberry harvest season? (If none, please write "0")

	<u>PERCENT</u>	<u>(N)</u>
a. Those who worked three days or less . . .	28.5	(110)
b. Those who worked four days to one week. .	22.1	(110)
c. Those who worked from one to two weeks. .	18.7	(110)
d. Those who worked over two weeks	30.7	(110)

7. What percent of your workers brought their families to Oregon? (just your best estimate).

(N = 105) MEAN PERCENT = 21.6

8. What percent of your adult and teen-age workers were from each of the following groups that harvested your strawberries in 1992? (Fill in your best estimate for each category. If "none", please write "0". Make sure your percents total 100% at the bottom of each column)

	Percent of Workers:	
	<u>16 OR OLDER</u>	<u>UNDER 16</u>
a. Local workers who are U.S. citizens	14.8	37.7
b. Local workers who are non-U.S.citizens	24.7	17.0
c. Workers from other areas who are U. S. citizens.	7.2	6.4
d. Workers from other areas who are non-U.S.citizens	52.4	38.8
	(N = 111)	(N = 51)

9a. If a strawberry grower came to you and asked you to name the best method for recruiting pickers, which one method (in Question 9) would you recommend as your BEST method? Second BEST method? Finally, which method is the WORST?

	% BEST	% SECOND BEST	% WORST
A. Walk-on's (no recruitment)	6	15	11
B. Labor contractor	39	7	8
C. Word of mouth by employees	14	38	0
D. State employment office.	0	0	49
E. Workers who return year after year .	31	29	1
F. Out-of-state phone solicitations that offer to supply workers	0	0	22
G. Newspaper want-ads	6	9	8
H. Other (Specify _____)	4	3	1
TOTAL	100	100	100
	(N=98)	(N=86)	(N=86)

10. Please indicate whether or not you use the following methods to keep pickers working for you throughout the strawberry season?

	<u>%YES</u>	<u>%NO</u>	(N)
a. End of season bonus	6	94	(110)
b. End of season picnic.	18	82	(110)
c. Increase the piece rate for late picking.	86	14	(110)
d. Agreement with growers who need pickers after strawberry harvest	9	91	(110)
e. Raise crops that require hand pickers after strawberry harvest	44	56	(110)
f. Pay transportation between workers' living quarters and field	14	86	(110)
g. On-farm workers' housing	26	74	(110)
h. Other (Specify _____) .	16	84	(110)

11. Did you pay your strawberry pickers an hourly wage or by piece-rate?

(N)	<u>PERCENT</u>	
1	1	HOURLY WAGE
110	99	PIECE-RATE

11a. What percentage of your workers, if any, could not make minimum wage on a piece-work basis?

(N = 102) MEAN = 10.5 MIN = 0 MAX = 100
SUM = 10.76

11b. How many workers, if any, were terminated because they could not earn enough to make minimum wage?

(N = 99) MEAN = 3.4 MIN = 0 MAX = 120 SUM = 335

12. Not counting year-round workers, please indicate whether or not you hired hand-harvest labor for each of the months listed below. (Circle one number for each month. Be sure to include workers for all your hand-harvested crops, not just strawberries.)

	<u>YES,</u> <u>% HIRED</u>	<u>NO, % NOT</u> <u>HIRED</u>	(N)
July 1991	74	26	111
August 1991	53	47	111
September 1991.	40	60	111
October 1991	20	80	111
November 1991	11	89	111
December 1991	4	96	111
January 1992.	3	97	111
February 1992	3	97	111
March 1992.	7	93	111
April 1992	15	85	111
May 1992	86	14	111
June 1992	97	3	111

APPENDIX B. SUMMARY OF COMPLETION RATES

Names and addresses of all known commercial strawberry growers in the state were provided by the Oregon Strawberry Commission. A total of 329 names were available for contact. An eligible respondent was defined as a grower who had harvested at least one acre of strawberries for processing in 1992. Three waves of mail questionnaires and one telephone contact were made.

Results of the contacts were:

Returned	121
No commercial berries raised in 1992	77
No longer raising berries	15
No longer farming	13
Duplicates	8
Undeliverable	7
Lived outside Oregon	1
Refused	9
Not returned	78
	—
Total	329

An adjusted completion rate of 58 percent was achieved, after nongrowers and other ineligible were subtracted from the base.

The 78 growers who had not responded were telephoned to learn their strawberry production status for 1992. A total of 54 either had not raised strawberries, had raised less than one acre, or had only U-pick or fresh market operations. An adjusted completion rate, based on the results of the telephone followup, increased our completion rate to 69 percent. This is slightly higher than the 63 percent achieved in the 1990, and 65 percent in the 1987, surveys.

**APPENDIX C. ESTIMATION OF THE SIZE AND PRODUCTIVITY THE
WORK FORCE**

Direct measures of the size and productivity of the work force was not possible from the data available. Methods used for estimation of these measures are described in the following sections.

Size of the work force

First, the number of workers for each farm is estimated as the ratio: number of worker days required to harvest the crop (product of Questions 4 and 5) divided by the average number of working days per worker. The average number of working days per worker is calculated as the sum of products of the midpoints¹ of intervals for picking days and the corresponding proportion of workers in each interval (Questions 6a – 6d). Next, the number of workers is multiplied by the worker – type proportions (Questions 8a – 8d). The resulting number of workers of each type (local U.S. citizens, etc.) are summed over the farms in the sample. Finally, these sample totals are adjusted to the population level by multiplying them by the ratio of the population and sample acres of strawberries harvested ($6,100/3,285.6 = 1.857$). The resulting work force estimates are presented in Table 1, page 4.

Productivity of the work force

The estimated average productivity of all workers on a farm is found by dividing the pounds harvested (Question 3) by the estimated number of workers on the farm. Such direct productivity estimates cannot be found by type of worker since pounds harvested are not segregated by worker type. In order to estimate productivity by type of worker, only those growers (n=94) who reported that more than 50 percent of their crop was harvested by one type of worker (local U.S. citizens, local aliens, non-local U.S. citizens, non-local aliens) were used. This stratified subsample represented 85 percent of the sample growers (n=111) whose responses were used in the analyses, 89 percent of the sample total work force, and 93 percent of the sample acres harvested. Appendix Table C1 gives the distribution of adult work types within the worker type strata. Workers representing the “pure” type of their respective stratum were well

1/ Midpoints employed were: for Q6a, 2; for Q6b, 5.5; for 6c, 10.5; and for 6d, and for 6d, $((Q5-15)/2) + 15$

above the 50 percent cutoff, with values ranging from 79 percent for non-local U.S. citizens to 89 percent for local U.S. citizens. The analysis is confined to adult workers.

Direct productive estimates for those farms that employed more than one type of worker would treat all worker types on the farm equally productive. Regression analyses were used to adjust the estimates for those farms that employed more than one type of worker. We found that two variables indicative of picking conditions: Y = crop yield measured as pounds harvested per acre, and D = density of pickers measured as pickers per acre were found to have statistically significant (P -value < 0.0001) regression coefficients in the regression equation

$$\log(P) = a_1 + b_1 Y + b_2 D + e$$

where P denotes the productivity of all workers on a farm, $\log(P)$ a logarithmic transformation of P , a_1 the stratum - dependent intercepts, b_1 (>0) and b_2 (<0) the regression coefficients of Y and D respectively, and e is the residual term. This regression equation produced the coefficient of variation of 63 percent ($R^2 = .63$) for the stratified subsample of 94 farms. Let \hat{P}_i denote regression prediction of productivity for type- i workers on a farm with predictor values Y and D , and P the direct productivity of all workers on the farm. The productivity of type- i workers on a farm in stratum i is calculated as the ratio estimator

$$P_i = P \left(\frac{\hat{P}_i}{\sum_{j=1}^4 \hat{P}_j (N_j/N)} \right),$$

where the productivity estimate for all workers on the farm (P) is adjusted by the factor formed from the predicted productivity for type- i workers divided by the predicted productivity of all workers on the farm. Here, N_i denotes the number of type- i workers on the farm and N the total workers of all types. Note that no adjustment results ($P_i = P$) for pure worker-type farms ($N_i = N$). These worker-type specific estimates, P_i , were averaged over the farms within the corresponding worker-type stratum to give the productivity values reported in Table 2.

APPENDIX TABLE C1. Distribution of adult worker – type in each of the sample strata

Type of worker in sample	Workers selected by group			
	50% > Local U.S. citizens	50% > Local aliens	50% > Non-local U.S. citizens	50% > Non-local aliens
	%	%	%	%
Local U.S. citizens	85	8	11	4
Local aliens	4	83	0	8
Non-local U.S. citizens	7	1	79	4
Non-local aliens	<u>4</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>84</u>
Total	100	100	100	100
(Number of workers)	(277)	(2,377)	(1,029)	(8,577)
(Number of growers reporting)	(10)	(21)	(4)	(59)

