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Pines in Lines: Tree Planting, H2B Guest Workers, and Rural Poverty in Alabama

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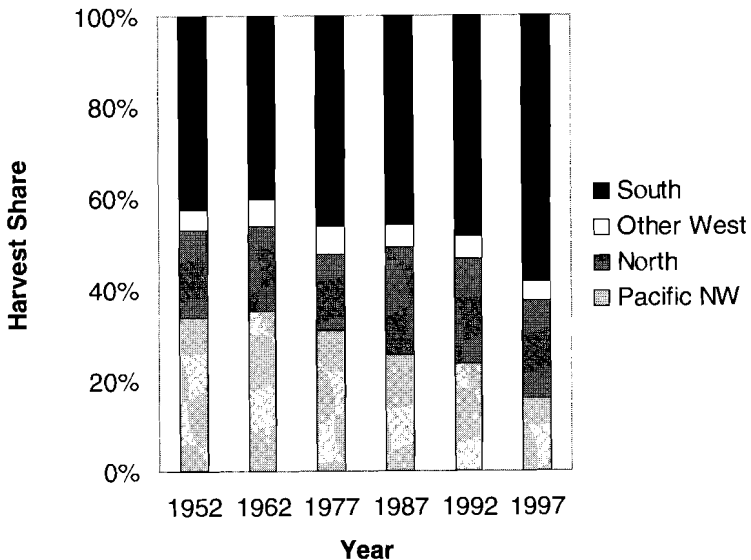
ABSTRACT The southeastern United States has become the most important timber producing region in the country. Despite increases in productivity, questions remain regarding the industry's role in developing, or failing to develop, rural communities in many of the poorest areas of the South. This article examines the recruitment and employment of migrant and guest workers for forest management work, specifically tree planting and reforestation. Based on semi-structured interviews with 35 H2B guest workers and 18 labor contractors the article analyzes the linkages between forest management labor recruitment, poverty, local labor markets, and timber productivity in the State of Alabama. We describe the wages, working conditions, organization, and workers' perspectives on forest management work in the South. We also describe the relationship between labor contracting in the southern forest products industry and the H2B guest workers program. We conclude with a discussion of the policy implications of an expanded guest worker program on rural communities and labor markets.

The southern region of the United States led all other regions of the country with 79 percent of the total acreage of trees planted in the United States in 1998 (USDA Forest Service 2002). Most of these trees were planted by hand by tree planters from Mexico and Central America. In the South, tree planters are primarily H2B guest workers recruited to work for U.S. forest labor contractors. The contractors supply their work visas and transport them from major cities in Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras. A smaller proportion

of the tree planters are resident aliens or undocumented workers who migrate across the United States working in agriculture, poultry-processing, construction, landscaping, hotels, and restaurants. In early December workers arrive in places such as: Tilly, Arkansas; Monroeville, Alabama; and Franklin, Georgia, and begin the job of planting the more than two million acres of trees that are planted in the South every winter. In the past couple of decades these workers have helped transform the landscape of the rural South from exhausted agricultural fields and idle pasture to one dominated by forests and pine plantations.

Forest inventories have expanded across the South as harvesting and processing technology have changed to facilitate the rising importance of southern timber. Over the past decade, the positioning of large processing sites, mainly pulp and chip mills, in the South has increased the intensity and scale of timber harvesting. Pulpwood accounted for about one-third of total timber harvested in the United States in 1996 with more than three-fourths of the harvest in the South (USDA Forest Service 2002). Southern timber production more than doubled between the 1950s and 1990s. The southern share of U.S. production rose from 41 percent to 58 percent while the South's share of world production rose from 6.3 to 15.8 percent (Haynes 2001).

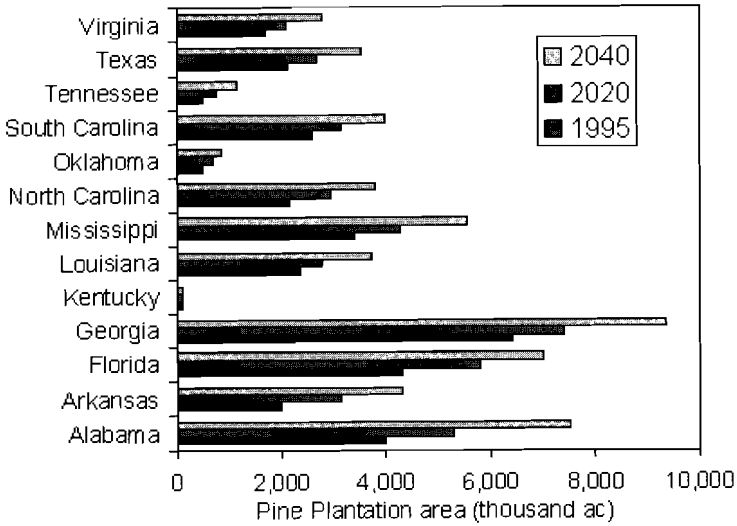
The South contains the most intensively managed forests in the world (U.S. Forest Service 2001b). Management intensity is reflected in the scale of activities such as tree planting, thinning, and herbicide application, all of which are increasingly being done by migrant workers. Management intensity also refers to the amount of timber production from planted pines, or plantations, as compared to timber production through natural regeneration (U.S. Forest Service 2001b). The area of natural pine has declined from about 72 million acres in 1953 to about 34 million acres in 1999. At the same time, planted pine has increased from about 2 million acres in 1953 (U.S. Forest Service 2001b) to more than 32 million acres in 1999. Pine plantations make up 36 percent of pine stands in the South. The U.S. Forest Service forecasts that the area of pine plantations will increase dramatically in every southern state except Kentucky. The Forest Service also predicts that plantations will increase in the South overall by more than 65 percent between 1995 and 2040 to 54 million acres, up from the current level of 32 million acres.

Figure 1. Shares of Timber Harvest Volumes, By Region of the United States, 1952 – 1997.

Source: USDA Forest Service 2002.

In the South, forest industries have found a complimentary intersection of a favorable climate for growing trees, ample water for transportation and processing, cheap non-unionized labor, low property taxes, and local economic incentives for relocation (Joshi et al. 2000). Subsequently, there has been a tremendous reallocation of investments from western states to the South during the past two decades. Endless cotton fields have been replaced by pine and hardwood forests, processing mills have sprouted across the landscape, and the rural South has been heralded as the “wood basket” for the world (Williams 2000). Still questions remain regarding the industry’s role in developing, or failing to develop, rural communities in many of the poorest areas of the South (Bliss and Bailey forthcoming). In the State of Alabama, research has shown that after decades of active recruitment of forest products industries and increased forest productivity, rural development has failed to occur and in fact “timber dependency” has helped maintain racially-based

Figure 2. Pine Plantation Area by State for 1995, 2020, and 2040.



Source: Prestemon and Abt 2002.

social inequities and segmented labor markets (Bailey et al. 1996), inadequately funded public schools (Joshi et al. 2000), and inequitable land concentrations that can be traced back to slave-based agriculture in the pre-Civil War era (Bliss, Walkingstick and Bailey 1998).

The overall aim of the research presented here is to explore the question of why guest workers and migrants are being brought to an area of persistent poverty and high unemployment to supply low-skilled labor to an expanding industry. Under this overarching aim this particular paper is motivated by three specific objectives, which are to: 1) describe the wages, working conditions, organization, and workers' perspectives on forest management jobs; 2) analyze the relationship between labor contracting in the southern forest products industry and the H2B guest worker program; and 3) discuss the potential policy implications of expanded guest worker programs on rural communities and labor markets.

As was discussed above, the U.S. Forest Service predicts that pine plantations will increase in the South by 65 percent between 1998 and 2040. Understanding the relationship between

guest worker programs and rural communities will become increasingly important as the forest products industry has to dramatically expand its labor force to meet these needs. The increasing demand for labor will require the industry to either lobby for the expansion of guest worker programs, recruit more undocumented labor, or recruit native workers. Any of these scenarios will have strong impacts on rural labor markets and rural communities.

In the following section we provide a literature review and present the theoretical framework used for framing the study. We discuss the social and economic context of persistent poverty and dual labor markets in which the forest products industry is embedded in the rural South.

Theoretical Framework

Poverty in the Black Belt of Alabama

The pulp and paper industry of Alabama, and the tree resources on which they depend, are concentrated in a poverty-stricken region known as the Black Belt (Bliss et al. 1998). Originally named for its dark soils, the Black Belt, stretching in an arc from Virginia to Louisiana, is known today for its predominant African-American population. The Black Belt is made up 16 rural counties extending across the bottom half of the State. The Black Belt was the former center of plantation cotton agriculture, but has since become one of the poorest regions in the South, and thus the United States. The Black Belt is home to persistent poverty, high unemployment, low education, poor health, and high infant mortality (Wimberley and Morris 1996). In Alabama, the region also contains some of the largest concentrations of loblolly pine plantations in the world. The growth of the forest products sector has failed to provide large gains in employment or economic opportunities for African-Americans in the region, and has only succeeded in reinforcing racial divisions and economic segmentation (Bailey et al. 1996).

In 1998, eight counties in the Black Belt of Alabama were ranked among the 100 poorest counties in the nation (Bliss and Bailey forthcoming). The latest estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that Alabama's poverty rate is 16.2 percent, while the national average is 13.3 percent (U.S.Census 2000). Some of the

highest levels of persons living below the poverty level can be found throughout the counties of Alabama's Black Belt; the average percentage of persons living below the poverty level in the Black Belt is 27.7. Perry County leads the state with 36.6 percent of its population living below the poverty level.

High unemployment is prevalent in the region as well. The national unemployment average for the year 2000 was 4 percent; the average unemployment rate in Alabama for the same time period was 4.6 percent. The average unemployment rate for the Black Belt region as a whole was 9.2 percent. In the Black Belt, Sumter County has the highest unemployment rate at 13.2 percent, a rate almost three times higher than the state average (U.S. Census 2000).

Out-migration is another common demographic characteristic of the region, and is important for our discussion of the relation between the use of migrant labor and displacement of local workers (see below). The average net population growth rate for Alabama counties from 1990 to 2000 was 5.2 percent. In the Black Belt, the average net population growth rate for the same time period was negative 2.9 percent. The highest occurrence of out-migration was in Sumter County, with a net population growth rate of negative 13.5 percent. Only five of the sixteen counties in the Black Belt saw a positive net growth rate (U.S. Census 2000).

Most of the rural counties in Alabama have a high percentage of land in timber. Timberland is defined as "forest land capable of producing 20 cubic feet of industrial wood per acre per year and not withdrawn from timber utilization [by public policy]" (USDA Forest Service 2002:1). In the Black Belt, Clarke County leads the state with 91.5 percent of land area in timber. The average percentage of timberland throughout the Black Belt is 77.5 percent; the average for the State of Alabama is 69.9 percent. The Black Belt is also home to many of Alabama's pulp and paper mills, and the timber of the Black Belt is the primary source of fiber for these mills. Ten of the Black Belt counties were ranked among Alabama's top twenty counties in total stumpage revenue from sales of forest products for the year 2001 (Alabama Forestry Commission, 2001). Clarke County led the State in total stumpage revenue at \$52.8 million, followed by Hale County at \$41 million.

Poverty, unemployment and out-migration are common features of life in Alabama's Black Belt. The coexistence of these

features with high timber production, forests products manufacturing, and relatively large cash receipts from timber sales further emphasize the economic segmentation of the industry. There is money to be made in timber, either through core jobs in manufacturing or through timberland ownership. However, a great majority of people are being left out of the spoils, raising questions concerning the relationship between the wealth generation of the forest industry and the impoverishment of Alabama's Black Belt.

Previous research has shown the links between land ownership patterns and poverty in the Black Belt (Bliss et al. 1998) and racially-based segmentation of labor markets in pulp and paper mills (Bailey et al. 1996). These trends are further reflected in industrial recruitment of migrant labor in forestry. High levels of timber management intensity (planting, thinning, herbicide application) are occurring in areas of high poverty and high unemployment. This work is being done almost totally by migrants and guest workers. The statistics presented above highlight two conflicting trends concerning the organization of the labor market for forest management work. The unemployment and poverty statistics presented above for the Black Belt suggest that there are plenty of local workers available to take positions in forest work. However, the levels of out-migration suggest that the young, low-skilled workers that would be candidates for these positions have left the region for better opportunities in metropolitan areas. This pattern of out-migration by young, low-skilled workers has been described for other southern rural industries, such as carpet manufacturing (Hernández-León and Zúñiga 2000) and poultry processing (Kandel and Parrado forthcoming), in which migrants have been recruited to fill labor shortages for bottom-level, low-wage, low-skill positions.

The poverty evident in many parts of the Deep South is a remnant of the patterns of social interaction and organization created by plantation cotton agriculture. Cheap labor was equally important to plantation owners in the past as it is to timberland owners today, and many of the characteristics of the region's political economy can be found in the paternalism, fatalism, and factionalism that structured work relations in the South in previous eras (Hyland and Timberlake 1993; Duncan 1996). The political and economic elite in rural areas of the South have kept African Americans dependent and economically weak, by blocking industrial diversification,

controlling local political and judicial systems, and maintaining social stratification in educational systems, employment opportunities, and community affairs (Duncan 1996). As mechanization has reduced employment opportunities in rural industries controlled by local elites, many workers and families from areas such as the Black Belt have migrated to urban areas. This trend is shown in the statistics described above. Those who have remained have traded dependency on landowners and local elites for welfare dependency and part-time work (Duncan 1996).

Obviously, low-wage, low-skill jobs such as tree planting are not the answer to problems of persistent poverty and underdevelopment in the region. Still, it is distressing that wages at the bottom of the occupational ladder in forest industries have been depressed to the point that labor must be recruited and imported into one of the poorest regions of the United States, and that wages in forest management are not attractive as compared to public assistance.

Labor contractors interviewed for this study state that they are not able to find local workers willing to do forest work even with increases in wages. They complain that American workers are lazy, not willing to do manual labor, and that many would rather live off of government assistance programs. One contractor¹ put it this way:

U.S. workers are spoiled and lazy. We have offered up to \$9/hour without a single American worker lasting more than 3 days. DOL [the U.S. Department of Labor – overseer of the H2B guest worker program] sets crazy wages all the way up to \$15/hour for workers who can't even sign their names and we still get no response. It's not a good job. Without the migrant workers, agriculture and forestry would die in this country. I guess if you raised wages high enough you could find local

¹ All informants, both contractors and workers, were assured of anonymity. We have decided not use pseudonyms or any other reference to particular informants in order to make sure there is no possible identification, mistaken or otherwise, of responses to particular individuals.

workers, but it wouldn't be economical for landowners to get involved in forestry. (Auburn, AL, March 17, 2002)

The last point is the most telling. Due to oversupply of tree resources and imports from Canada, prices for timber and pulp declined in the 1990s (USDA Forest Service 2002). Private landowners and industry have been searching for ways to reduce costs. The use of cheap migrant labor and guest workers has allowed them to reduce costs for management of forest lands and to continue investing in timber even with declining prices. The timber industry and forest labor contractors have lobbied for an expansion of federal guest worker programs, and it is likely that the industry will increasingly turn to guest workers to further reduce costs in forest management and other aspects of wood products production, such as work in timber harvesting and bottom-level positions in sawmill, pulp, and paper mills.

Dual Labor Markets and Industrial Recruitment

It is not a new observation that American workers shun low-paid, dangerous, low-prestige jobs. Dual labor market theory provides a structural explanation for how and why this occurs through analysis of the demand for inexpensive and flexible labor (Lamphere, Stepick and Grenier 1994; Massey et al. 1994). International migration is caused by a permanent demand for foreign labor that stems from certain characteristics of industrial economies (Piore 1979). The first characteristic is the duality of labor and capital. Because capital is a fixed factor of production, the employer bears the costs of its non-use. Unlike capital, labor is a variable factor; the employer does not bear costs of its unemployment. However, labor should be viewed as segmented into two sectors, a capital-intensive primary and a labor-intensive secondary one (Harris 1995). The primary sector is more like capital. This is composed of highly-skilled, highly-paid workers in which the owner has invested considerable amounts in recruitment, training, and benefits. In periods of economic downturn, the owner is more inclined to retain these workers due to previous investments and the potential future costs of recruitment and rehiring of replacements when economic cycles

swing upward again. However, the secondary sector is low-skilled, low-pay, and highly unstable. These workers are the first to go during periods of declining production and economic returns.

Native workers shun jobs at the bottom of the job hierarchy in the secondary sector because of low pay, low status, and small possibilities of upward mobility. In *Birds of Passage: Migrant Labor in Industrial Societies*, Michael Piore (1979) argues that the local workers' disinclination to occupy unattractive jobs cannot be solved completely by standard market mechanisms. He argues that wages reflect supply and demand, but also provide status and prestige. Informal social expectations and formal institutional mechanisms ensure that wages correspond to hierarchies of prestige. If there is a scarcity at the bottom of the job hierarchy, the employer cannot simply raise wages to attract more workers. This would upset socially-defined relationships between status and wage. If wages are raised at the bottom, there will be expectations for similar raises throughout the hierarchy. The bottom cannot be eliminated. If low-wage, low-skill positions are eliminated through mechanization, the next rung up the ladder becomes the lowest status position (Piore 1979).

Employers need workers who view bottom level jobs as a means to earning money not status (Massey 1999). This is the role of immigrants, and even more specifically temporary guest workers. They have little interest in improving their status or standing in the host society, and such jobs are better paid compared to those at home (Massey 1999). In fact, the jobs they possess during their migration period, and the remittances that they send home, carry considerable honor and prestige. So, the forest industry has turned to migrant workers to reduce labor costs at the bottom rungs of their employment ladder. Reducing costs at the bottom of the employment ladder lessens wage inflation at higher levels, and eases the process of reducing wages and costs throughout the structure of the industry. First, however, the companies have to find the workers willing to work for less. They have accomplished this by actively recruiting and creating their own networks and pools of workers through the federal H2B guest worker programs.

The need for a cheap, compliant workforce also has its roots in the social relations that have been institutionalized in the rural southern political economy – slavery and share-cropping (Duncan

1996). Labor contractors, and plantation owners before them, keep workers in an inferior position through work relations characterized by permanent, personalistic bonds, or temporary, anonymous contracts. These coercive relations are reflected throughout the social order of many of these areas.

According to interviews with labor contractors, migrant workers began working in tree planting in the South in large numbers in the early to mid-1980s. This period corresponds to the beginning of the shift in the share of U.S. timber production from the Pacific Northwest to the South. The geographical shift in the timber industry occurred within the context of similar moves in other industries, primarily manufacturing industries, which moved to the South to take advantage of low wages, the lack of unions, and attractive recruitment packages and tax abatements offered by state and local governments (Griffith 1995). The economic stagnation and depression that had afflicted the South for decades transformed into an economic boom as many industries relocated to the region. This boom created opportunities for increased wages and upward mobility for even low-skilled workers across the region. The least desirable positions with low wages and demanding working conditions were shunned by native workers, and many industries had to look outside of the United States to find new labor pools. Immigrants were recruited to take the worst jobs in industries such as forestry, poultry processing, meat-packing, carpet manufacturing, construction, and the onshore oil industry (Donato, Bankston, and Robinson 2001; Griffith 1995; Hernández-León and Zúñiga 2000; Kandel and Parrado forthcoming; Murphy, Blanchard and Hill 2001). The first migrant workers to begin forest work were undocumented, and a large number of tree planters are still working and living in the United States illegally. However, since the early 1990s the industry has used the H2B guest worker program to supply the majority of the workers. Many contractors said that the H2B workers gave them access to workers that were not vulnerable to raids by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and that were more reliable and likely to keep working through the end of their contract.

Next, we discuss the research that was conducted regarding the use of migrant and guest workers in southern forest industries. The following section provides an explanation of the research

methods used to work with both forest labor contractors and their hired workers.

Methods

Migrant and guest worker communities do not easily lend themselves to scientific sampling procedures. In many ways they represent a hidden population that is not easily approached for research (Schensul et al. 1999). Labor contractors are also difficult to approach. Many are worried about increasing government regulation and legal concerns of hiring documented and undocumented workers. Building trust is essential to being able to work with both groups.

We decided to use qualitative methods of participant observation and semi-structured interviews in our data collection with both the contractors and the workers. We used snowball sampling to identify key informants among the contractors and the work crews. Both qualitative methods and snowball sampling have been shown to be effective in studies of “difficult-to-find” populations (Bernard 1994). We traveled to work sites and the hotels in which the work crews were staying and followed them through their work days. After trust was established, we conducted interviews with contractors, crew leaders, and workers.

The primary data presented here comes from participant observation with tree planting crews and semi-structured interviews with 35 migrant tree planters and 18 labor contractors. Tree planters were interviewed in Spanish by both authors on job sites in the forest and in their hotels from December, 2001 through February, 2002 and between December, 2002 and February, 2003. Both authors participated in the interviews, in some cases conducting the interviews jointly, and in others separately. Interviews and telephone interviews were conducted with labor contractors from December, 2001 through December, 2002.

All of the contractors and workers interviewed for this project were participants in the H2B program. These groups are more willing to cooperate with researchers since there are fewer legal risks involved. This does exclude the perspectives of undocumented workers and the contractors who hire them, an important

component of the workforce in forest management.² However, these groups are much less approachable. We hope to use the trust established with H2B contractors and crews to contact non-H2B contractors and undocumented crews for a future study.

Primary data is complemented with data on the timber industry provided by the U.S. Forest Service Southern Forest Resource Assessment of 2001 and data provided by the U.S. Department of Labor on the H2B non-agricultural guest worker program.

The next section provides results of the interviews and participant observation research. This consists of an overview of the organization of forest management work, and a general description of some of the perspectives of the migrants and guest workers that make-up the crews. We also discuss the relationship between the H2B guest worker program and industrial recruitment of labor to the rural South.

Results

Tree Planting in the South

Migrant employment in bottom level forestry positions has increased despite overall decline in employment in “woodwork” and a steady replacement of labor by capital over the last two decades (Bliss and Flick 1994). One aspect of forest industry restructuring is the use of independent contractors who supply workers for secondary labor markets. Independent contractors are being used to supply labor for pulp and paper mills, but also for jobs in the management of timber lands doing work such as tree planting, herbicide application, and boundary maintenance (Bailey et al. 1996). The

² Labor contractors for the timber industry estimate that 90 percent to 95 percent of the trees planted by hand in the South are currently planted by H2B guest workers. Since most of the same crews also do herbicide application, we can assume that much of that work is also done by guest workers. This large percentage is due to the fact that the largest three tree planting contractors in the South are all H2B program participants. These contractors get most of the large acreage tree planting contracts in the South, but there are many small contractors who hire undocumented workers for small acreage contracts.

contractors range in size from large operations employing thousands of workers on job sites all over the country, to single crews, usually headed by a supervisor or the contractor. Most of the contractors, even the larger ones, started out working on tree planting crews, and many of the new contractors entering the business are themselves former migrant workers.

Tree planters work in crews of between fifteen and twenty men. In the southeastern United States the crews plant primarily loblolly and shortleaf pine on industrial and private landholdings. They come to plant in early December, and stay for six to seven months. The planting season lasts until March in the South, and at that time some crews move to western states where the planting season lasts until late Spring. Other workers begin work on tree thinning crews and backpack-spraying herbicide crews. Many others move into other industries or return home.

The tools and the process of planting are simple, but it is rough and difficult work.³ The planters strap a bag to their back and fill it with pine seedlings. They move through clearcuts as a group planting in rows, more or less straight. The faster planters work on the edge of the clearing, and everyone else orients their planting on their line. The planter makes a hole about 9 inches deep with two swings of the hoedad (an axe-like tool), or the placement of the dibble stick (a shovel-like tool). The seedling is placed in the hole and the dirt is filled back in with a stomp of the boot. The crew works from early in the morning till the sun sets, often planting as much as 100 acres in a day. The logged areas and clearcuts range in size from a few acres to hundreds of acres, so they often move every couple of hours from site to site, planting ten acres in one place, and then twenty acres in another. The workers preferred big clearcuts where they do not lose so much time traveling from site to site.

The job requires speed and an efficiency that takes weeks to achieve. The planters spend most of their time bent over, and swinging the hoedad or dibble stick for eight to ten hours a day takes its toll on backs and shoulders. The planters are only paid between \$.015 and \$.06 per seedling, so there is not much time to relax. The ground is covered with downed logs, brush, and they must often climb through spiny thickets to continue with their line.

³ Descriptions of the work come from participant observation on tree-planting crews.

The planters said that it generally takes three weeks to break in a new planter so that they can take the harsh, physical work, and begin to work fast enough to make money. Many are not able to adjust to the harshness of the work, or are not able to develop the speed necessary to keep up with the rest of the crew. The planters said that a few turn around and go home after a couple of days of planting.

Many of the crews are made up of friends and families from the same city or village. Brothers often travel and work together. There are very few women who work with the migrant planting crews. If they do come, they usually do not plant. They cook while the men are working or remain at the truck and prepare bundles of separated seedlings. Most of the workers are in their late teens or early twenties. For many, it is their first trip to the United States. Many have young families, and they are using their earnings to build houses, buy land, and generally take care of their families back home. Many workers told us that they have come to work because of medical expenses, and the need to buy medicine for their family. Tree planters earn between \$300 and \$400 per week, and after food and lodging expenses (about \$80/week), they are able to send around \$600 - \$700 per month back to their families. One worker interviewed for the study said that he spends about ten months per year working in the United States. When he returns home, he does not work. His time at home is spent visiting relatives and going to soccer matches. He says, "People envy me." Another worker from Mexico said that on his return, he is able to purchase supplies for his house that has been under construction for the past five years. On each return trip, he says his wife and family are closer to owning and living in their own home. He describes his future home with pride – four bedrooms, a living room, a bathroom, and a large kitchen. He told us that he would already have been finished, but his son wanted to attend trade school so money was diverted from the construction to fund his education.

For most of the workers interviewed, hard work is nothing new to them. The majority are farmworkers or manual laborers in their home countries. However, this specific type of work was new to them. Before coming to the United States, none had ever planted trees. Most feel that it is difficult work. They described it as "un poco pesado" or a bit heavy.

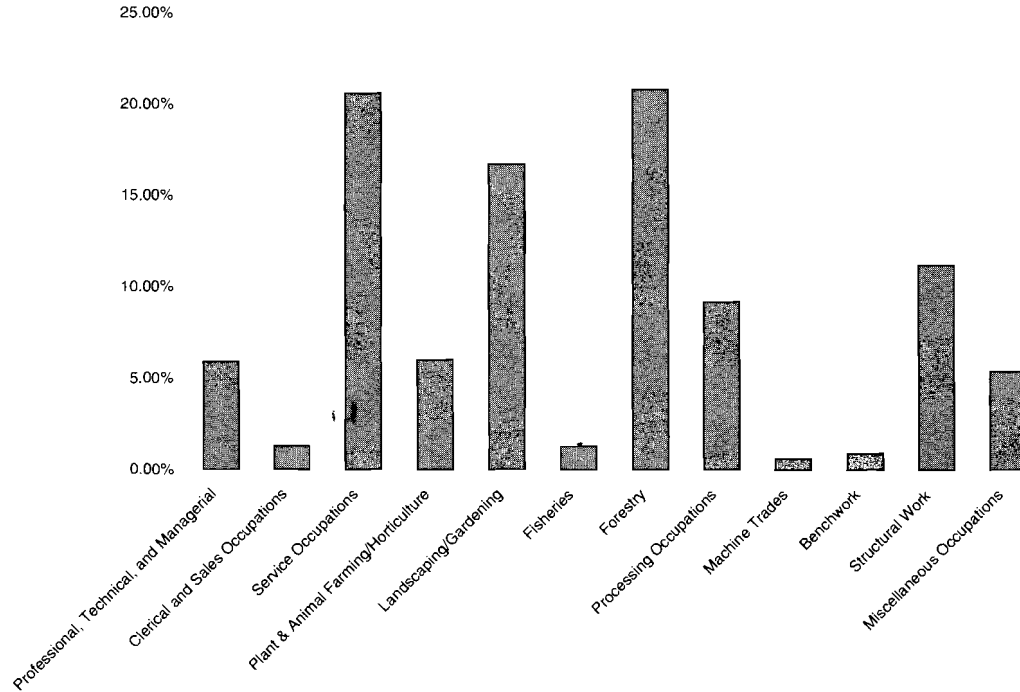
Forest Labor Contractors and the H2B program

Guest worker programs have a long history in the United States going back to the first Bracero program established with Mexico in 1917. A second Bracero program established between the United States and Mexico from the 1940s through the 1960s resulted in millions of Mexicans immigrating to the United States. (Stull, Broadway, and Griffith 1995). Although the Civil Rights movement ended the second Bracero program in the 1960s, guest worker programs were reestablished for a third time in the mid-1980s with the creation of the H-2 programs for agricultural and nonagricultural workers.

The H2B program came out of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. It was established as a means to supply temporary guest workers to non-agricultural industries facing labor shortages. The program began in earnest in the early 1990s. The H2B program has a limit of 66,000 work visas per year, but there have been recent moves in Congress seeking to increase the limit up to 200,000 or 300,000 per year. The events of September 11, 2001 put those initiatives on hold. At the time of this writing, two bills were working their way through Congress (S. 1161, Craig et al. and H.R. 2736, Berman). In the H2B program, employers who can demonstrate that they are facing labor scarcity apply for visas through the Department of Labor (DOL) and the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). If approved, the employers are issued a number of visas that they can grant to foreign workers to come to the United States and work for a set amount of time. Employers are required to pay the prevailing wage established by the government for each state and locality and provide transportation for the workers, but they are not required to pay for or provide housing or food.

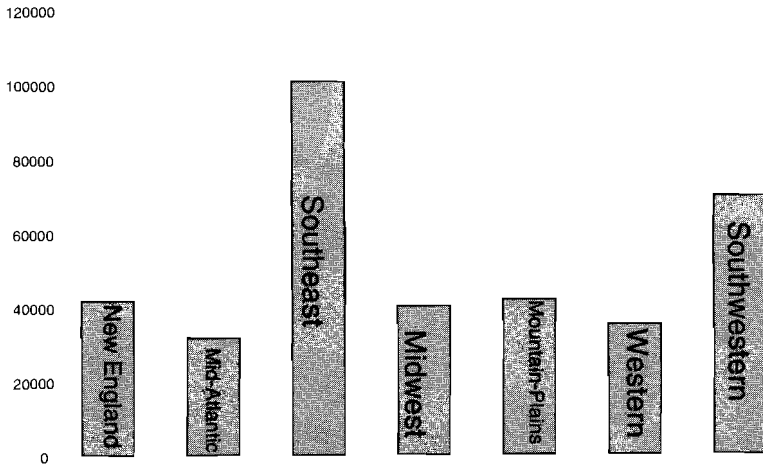
Forestry has been the dominant industry in the program since its inception, accounting for almost 21 percent of all visas requested between 1996 and 2001. Companies in the Southeast lead all other regions in participation in the H2B program with 100,552 visas requested between 1996 and 2001. The Southwest region is second with 69,672 visas requested during this time period. The state of Arkansas is included in the Southwest, but many of the forestry companies in Arkansas work throughout the Southeast in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. So, H2B guest worker

Figure 3. Visas Requested By Occupation Category, 1996 – 2001.



Source: Data provided by the Department of Labor.

Figure 4. Number of H2B Guest Worker Visas Requested By Region, 1996-2001.



Source: Data provided by the Department of labor

representation in the Southeast is likely even higher than shown in Figure 4.

There are many costs, in the form of time, money and frustration associated with applying for these visas. So, what is the rationale for hiring H2-B workers? One informant, a crew manager working for one of the larger forest labor contractors, put it this way:

There is not a cost advantage to bringing in migrant labor in terms of wages. We bring in migrants because they will actually do the work as opposed to American workers who will not last more than 1 week on the job. This job is not set up to support the American lifestyle, however it is perfect for a Mexican farmer who can do this type of work part of the year and work his farm the rest of the year (Reform, AL, January 15, 2003).

Many contractors like the H2B program because it gives them a stable, documented workforce. In the past, raids by INS would deplete their crews and leave them without the workers needed to fulfill contracts. The H2B program has also allowed the contractors to create their own labor pool. Some of the contractors have established recruiting networks in major cities in Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala. The recruiters are former workers who have worked their way up to become crew leaders. These men use ties with family and friends to recruit workers to fill the 15 to 20 man crews that typically work on planting jobs. These men find the workers to fill the positions, help them with the paperwork for obtaining visas, and assist them in obtaining airplane tickets and bus tickets for travel to the United States. Active recruitment by the labor contractors reduces the usual obstacles to migration by providing job contacts, information, visas, documentation, and transportation, making the decision to migrate much easier.

The same informant quoted above stated that his company plays by the rules and has nothing to hide when it comes to hiring practices. He further stated that they have recruiters in Mexico and they also contract out the visa process. They try to distance themselves legally from recruiters and the H2-B process, although he says they maintain close personal relationship with their recruiters. The informant acknowledged that the recruiting process is in need of scrutiny, especially due to abuse on the ground in the sending country. For example, he has heard of instances where a recruiter may charge each recruit up to an additional \$2,000 to obtain a visa.

Some of the contractors told us that they refuse to hire migrant workers with experience working in other industries in the United States. They prefer to hire workers directly from their home communities. One contractor told us that he only rehires workers for up to five years. He said that after five years the worker's productivity declines and they create more problems in terms of job complaints, requests for more pay, etc.

One of the other reasons that employers are in favor of the guest worker program may be that they are able to pay less in wages to a constantly revolving pool of workers. Data from the Department of Labor shows that the prevailing wage has not risen for tree planters in any part of the United States from 1996 to 2001, and that some companies are actually paying less to tree planters in 2001

than they paid in 1996. Some informants have suggested that tree planters are getting paid between a third and a half less than they did before the influx of guest workers in the mid-1990s.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Of all the workers interviewed, only one has ever worked on a crew with Americans and that was over 12 years ago. When asked why they thought this was the case, the worker responded, "Americans prefer easy work, they leave the hard work to us." Another worker responded, "Well, because these are our jobs." That is certainly the case now. Most of the contractors interviewed for this project thought that wages would have to be doubled before large numbers of local workers would enter forest management work. They argue that at that point tree planting would become too costly for small landowners, and there would be a decrease in the amount of available work. Others, however, suggest that use of migrants and guest workers had allowed contractors to pay less to the workers. One contractor told us, "It seems most large companies are paying migrants less than they paid 10 years ago and they are taking a bigger piece of the contract. Migrating here and working for less only keeps 'gringos' out of the work force." Another told us, "We seem to need alien workers to do certain jobs. Yet if wages were higher we would have plenty of workers. Twenty years ago all of the seedlings planted in the United States were by citizens and the prices were better then than they are now."

The question of labor market impacts is an empirical question that we hope to answer with further fieldwork. We doubt that in an area of high poverty and unemployment such as the Black Belt, wages on the order of \$16 and \$17 per hour would be required to entice local workers. We argue that a moderate increase in prevailing wages [set by the U.S. Department of Labor] to \$9 and \$10 per hour would be sufficient to provide employment opportunities for the large numbers of unemployed workers in the Black Belt. The prevailing wage set by the U.S. Department of Labor for the H2B program should more fairly reflect the labor market. With a large proportion of the total acreage of trees being planted in an area of Alabama with double the state and national average rate of unemployment, it is difficult to conceive that the contractors are facing

a labor shortage. We feel that they are only facing shortage of workers willing to work at the wage offered with no compensation for the harsh working conditions.

As migrants are recruited in large numbers into industries and nonmetropolitan rural areas in which they are newcomers, their impact on rural communities will become increasingly important. At present H2B workers are a relatively “invisible” population. They work in remote, isolated areas. They do not stay in one area for a long period of time, and, in general, they are not settling into rural migrant communities, or what have been referred to as pioneer settlements (Hernández-León and Zúñiga 2000). They place very few demands on local government services, including health and education systems, and their primary contact with community residents is in trips to the grocery store or to the bank. They are not eligible for most social services even though they pay taxes.

Despite their “invisibility” migrant workers and guest workers in the forest industries will soon be settling into rural areas of the South that do not have a history of immigration as the demand for their labor increases. It is important that policy makers recognize the impact of industrial recruitment and expansion of guest worker programs on rural areas of the South. They will be placing new types of demands on government services. These impacts will not only involve increased demand for services, but adjustment on the part of local agencies to meet the unique needs of a new cultural group. Bilingual education in the public schools and language and cultural training for health care workers are essential first steps. Recent case studies have expressed guarded optimism about the potential for integrating the new immigrants into the social and economic fabric of rural communities in the South (Hernández-León and Zúñiga 2000; Kandel and Parrado forthcoming). However, in areas that are already dependent on natural resources for employment and opportunity such as the Black Belt of Alabama, increased recruitment of migrants and guest workers may worsen economic segmentation and further marginalize groups already facing desperate economic conditions.

While the recruitment of guest workers is not necessarily displacing local workers already employed in forest management, it is negating employment opportunities that should have been created by industry expansion. Guest worker programs have allowed a

variety of industries to reduce labor costs for bottom-level positions in areas where industries should be generating economic growth and opportunity. While our research did not directly test theoretical perspectives regarding poverty or dual labor markets in the South that were discussed earlier in this paper, it does describe another aspect of the social and economic dynamics in the rural South. The paternalism, dependency, and coercion that have always characterized labor relations in the South are being transferred to a new group of workers that are moving into the region.

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