

PEACH GROWERS IN CALIFORNIA FARMS DESPERATE FOR WORKERS TO PICK THEIR FRUIT BEFORE THEY ROT



An interesting paradox seems to exist in the Marysville region, California, while the unemployment rate in the region is an amazing 16 and 18 percent, twice the national average; its farms are lying unharvested owing to lack of workers. It seems that peach farms in the Marysville region are covered in fruit but are rotting as there aren't enough workers to harvest them. One such farm belongs to a certain Dalvir Singh and his farm seems to be more affected than the other farms, suffering from a similar fate. Dalvir Gill owns 300 acres of peaches outside Marysville, California and sighs that he loses five percent of his fruit that is left unpicked, every day. 'I need at least 30 to 40 pickers every day but sometimes I get here, showed up, only 10 guys or five guys.' He says that the desperation of the situation makes him go from door to door searching for prospective workers, who tries to lure on to his farms through various inducements. Gurpreet Gill, Dalvir's nephew said, that this year has been harder than normal. The work is hard and dirty but it pays, so the locals instead of idling their time away should come and work, he says. "People they're just sitting at home doing nothing. Maybe they should get a job. You could easily make \$20 an hour over here." The labor shortage is of recent vintage, as early as five years ago there were ten applicants for every job available. The shortage of workers and the possibility of loss had driven Gurpreet, who works full-time as a business specialist at Wells Fargo, to help his uncle pick fruit on the farm, on his off days. However, this illustrates that local Americans do not have any inclination towards low-paying manual labor and prefer to allow easily available farm hand jobs to go unfilled and prefer to stay on the ranks of the unemployed or work on hourly wages at eateries and do other similar less strenuous jobs. This has also led to increased dependency on migrant labor, most of which is undocumented. Making matters worse, is the increased monitoring of illegal workers and mandating of harsher laws for those who employ them has sent undocumented workers fearful and reluctant to take these jobs, leaving the fields fallow, as US born citizens consider these jobs below their dignity to take. Although stringent federal immigration laws are important the only solution that farmers see to this perennial problem is many say the answer is to amend the H-2A federal guest worker program so visiting farm workers can stay in America and work toward legal immigration status. The H-2A visa permits employers, to seek foreign workers to fill seasonal labor shortages if they can show that local workers are not available. However, the farmers themselves could be indirectly contributing to the shortage of workers. Many peach farmers here pay by the bin and even tested and experienced pickers cannot make more than \$16 a bin. On an average it takes an hour of persistent picking to fill a bin. New workers, take longer to fill a bin and end up earning a lot less. Most pickers begin picking at sunrise and rest for a bite and a wink around noon when temperatures begin to soar. An experienced worker can often pick seven or eight bins a day. Gurpreet says that his uncle used to pay \$15 a bin, but the shortage has made him up his price to \$18 per bin. Analysts say that farms are reluctant to hire locals and it is not true that they are not getting responses from the natives. The reluctance it is alleged is because they are able to bend rules and exploit migrant workers, and pay them less and get more out of them, which would not be a possibility with the local workers. Moreover, if they paid by the hour and not by the bin, they'd be able to attract more workers. One person said that he was one of the many who had applied to work on the farm, but did not take up the job, because he realized that farm's pay-per-bin system meant that his earnings would be less than what it would cost him to commute to the farm.