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# Characteristics of Agricultural Work Force Households, 1987

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*There were almost 5.4 million agricultural work force households (households in which some member does farmwork at some time during the year) in 1987, down 4.1 percent from 1985. About two-thirds of agricultural work force households depend little on farmwork for employment, according to the 1987 Agricultural Work Force Survey. Those most affected by farm job loss would be the 1.5 million high-dependence households in which the head is primarily employed at farmwork. While most agricultural work force households are in the Eastern United States, the West has a greater proportion of households highly dependent on agriculture. This report provides national- and regional-level information on the number and characteristics of agricultural work force households, the persons living in these households, and the degree to which they depend on agriculture for employment.*

Almost 7.7 million persons 14 years of age and older were employed on U.S. farms as farm operators, hired farmworkers, and unpaid farmworkers in 1987 (about 5 percent fewer than in 1985) (table 1). Over 1 million persons, or 13 percent of all farmworkers, could be placed in more than one of those three farm occupation groups. For example, some farmers operated their own farm, but also hired themselves out for wages to other farmers. To avoid double counting individuals in more than one farm occupation group, persons were grouped by their *major* farmwork occupation, that is, the one in which the individual worked the most days in 1987. By this definition, there were approximately 2.7 million farm operators, nearly 2.2 million hired farmworkers, and almost 2.9 million unpaid farmworkers (fig. 1).

## Who Lives in Agricultural Work Force Households?

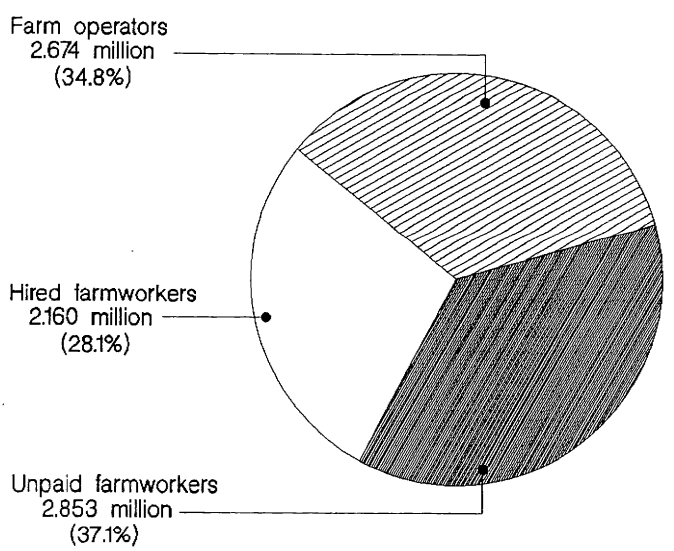
Households in which some member of the household did farmwork at some time during the year are referred to as agricultural work force households, of which there

**Table 1—Agricultural work force households, 1985 and 1987**

| Item                                   | 1985          | 1987   | Change  |
|--|---------------|--------|---------|
|  | --Thousands-- |        | Percent |
| Agricultural work force households     | 5,582         | 5,353  | -4.1    |
| All persons in households              | 17,596        | 16,775 | -4.7    |
| Farmworkers in households <sup>1</sup> | 8,061         | 7,687  | -4.6    |
| Farm operators                         | 2,818         | 2,674  | -5.1    |
| Hired farmworkers                      | 2,220         | 2,160  | -2.7    |
| Unpaid farmworkers                     | 3,023         | 2,853  | -5.6    |

<sup>1</sup>Refers to major farmwork occupation.  
Source: The 1985 and 1987 Agricultural Work Force Surveys.

Figure 1  
**Components of the agricultural work force by major farmwork occupation, 1987**



The total agricultural work force numbered 7.687 million persons.

were 5.4 million in 1987, down 4.1 percent from 1985 (table 1). Over 4.3 million agricultural work force households (80 percent of the total) were headed by a farmworker (table 2). Almost 2 million (37 percent) were headed by a farm operator, 912,000 (17 percent) were headed by a hired farmworker, and 1.4 million (27 percent) were headed by an unpaid farmworker.<sup>1</sup> The remaining 1 million households (20 percent) were headed by a nonagricultural worker, that is, someone other than a farmworker.

The average size of agricultural work force households was 3.1 persons, compared with a U.S. average of 2.7 persons. About 62 percent of all agricultural work force

households contained three or fewer members; 12 percent were only one person.

Relatively few agricultural work force households (24 percent) were actually on a farm. The likelihood of a household being on a farm was related to the major farmwork occupation of the head of the household. Over 50 percent of the households headed by farm operators were on farms, compared with only 14 percent of the households headed by hired farmworkers, 5 percent of those headed by unpaid farmworkers, and 4 percent of those headed by nonagricultural workers.

A total of almost 16.8 million persons lived in agricultural work force households in 1987, including almost 6 million in households headed by farm operators, 2.9

<sup>1</sup>Many farmworker heads of households, especially unpaid farmworkers, do nonfarmwork in addition to their farmwork.

**Table 2—Characteristics of agricultural work force households, 1987<sup>1</sup>**

| Characteristic                    | Total  | Headed by <sup>2</sup> |                  |                   |                        |
|-----------------------------------|--------|------------------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
|                                   |        | Farm operator          | Hired farmworker | Unpaid farmworker | Nonagricultural worker |
| <b>Households</b>                 | 5,353  | 1,976                  | 912              | 1,421             | 1,044                  |
| <i>Thousands</i>                  |        |                        |                  |                   |                        |
| Size of household:                |        |                        |                  |                   |                        |
| 1 person                          | 623    | 171                    | 133              | 319               | 0                      |
| 2-3 persons                       | 2,702  | 1,114                  | 437              | 658               | 493                    |
| 4 or more persons                 | 2,028  | 691                    | 342              | 444               | 552                    |
| <i>Persons</i>                    |        |                        |                  |                   |                        |
| Average persons per household     | 3.1    | 3.0                    | 3.2              | 2.7               | 3.8                    |
| <i>Thousands</i>                  |        |                        |                  |                   |                        |
| Farm residence:                   |        |                        |                  |                   |                        |
| Farm                              | 1,262  | 1,020                  | 130              | 71                | 42                     |
| Nonfarm                           | 4,090  | 956                    | 782              | 1,350             | 1,002                  |
| <b>Persons in households</b>      | 16,775 | 5,987                  | 2,921            | 3,898             | 3,969                  |
| Race/ethnic group:                |        |                        |                  |                   |                        |
| White                             | 14,593 | 5,763                  | 1,857            | 3,626             | 3,347                  |
| Minority                          | 2,182  | 224                    | 1,064            | 272               | 622                    |
| Age of household residents:       |        |                        |                  |                   |                        |
| Under 14 years                    | 3,780  | 1,223                  | 824              | 1,082             | 651                    |
| 14-64 years                       | 12,100 | 4,243                  | 1,998            | 2,691             | 3,168                  |
| 65 years and older                | 895    | 522                    | 98               | 125               | 150                    |
| <b>Farmworkers in households</b>  | 7,687  | 3,403                  | 1,224            | 1,878             | 1,183                  |
| Farm operators                    | 2,674  | 2,518                  | 6                | 23                | 127                    |
| Hired farmworkers                 | 2,160  | 254                    | 1,175            | 42                | 689                    |
| Unpaid farmworkers                | 2,853  | 631                    | 43               | 1,813             | 367                    |
| <i>Persons</i>                    |        |                        |                  |                   |                        |
| Average farmworkers per household | 1.4    | 1.7                    | 1.3              | 1.3               | 1.1                    |

<sup>1</sup>Numbers may not add to totals due to rounding. <sup>2</sup>Refers to the major farmwork occupation of the head of household.

million in households headed by hired farmworkers, and another 3.9 million in households headed by unpaid farmworkers. Most of the residents of these households were white; minorities (including Hispanics, blacks, and others) accounted for only 13 percent of the total household population. The largest concentration of minorities (36 percent) was in households headed by hired farmworkers.

Dependents in households are estimated as persons under 14 years and those 65 years and older. The proportion of the population under age 14 in agricultural work force households (23 percent) was similar to the U.S. average (22 percent). However, persons age 65 and older made up only 5 percent of the residents in agricultural work force households compared with the U.S. average of 12 percent.

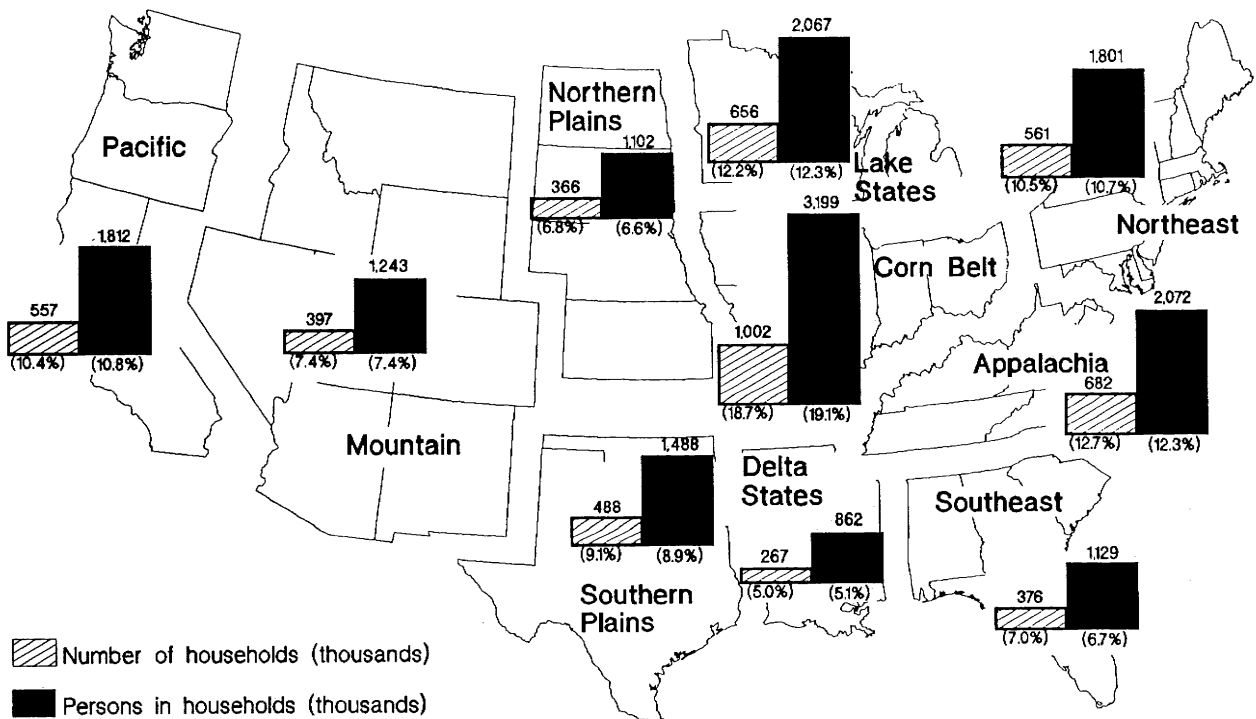
Fifty-six percent of all farmworkers were the head of their household and 85 percent of all farmworkers resided in households headed by a farmworker (table 2). Households headed by farm operators contained

44 percent of all farmworkers and 94 percent of the farm operators. The average agricultural work force household contained 1.4 farmworkers.

### Location of Agricultural Work Force Households

The number of agricultural work force households and the number of people living in them varies significantly across geographic areas. The 10 farm production regions shown in figure 2 differ in soil, slope of land, climate, types of crops and commodities produced, and labor required to produce the commodities. The four regions with the largest number of agricultural work force households are in the eastern half of the country: the Corn Belt (19 percent), Appalachia (13 percent), Lake States (12 percent), and the Northeast (11 percent). The Pacific region is the only other region with over 10 percent of all agricultural work force households. The Delta States had the fewest number of agricultural work force households, only 5 percent of the national total.

Figure 2  
**Agricultural work force households and persons residing in them, 1987**



Numbers in parentheses refer to percent of U.S. total. Pacific region includes Alaska and Hawaii.

## How Much Do Farmworkers Depend on Farm Employment?

The degree to which farmworkers depend on farmwork for employment varies considerably. Some workers work year-round doing only farmwork; others work mostly at nonfarm jobs, doing seasonal farmwork; and still others do only seasonal farmwork and are unemployed or not in the labor force for the remainder of the year. This latter group includes mostly students and homemakers. To determine how dependent farmworkers were on farmwork for employment, they were asked to report their primary employment status during 1987, that is, the labor force activity worked at most during the year.

Most people who did farmwork in 1987 did not consider it their primary employment. Most farmworkers worked primarily at a nonfarm job or did not work during most of the year. Only 27 percent of all farmworkers considered themselves to be primarily employed in farmwork (fig. 3). About 40 percent of all farmworkers reported that nonfarm work was their primary employment status and 33 percent stated they were primarily unemployed or not in the labor force for most of the year. The primary employment status of farmworkers differed by major farmwork activity; 46 percent of the

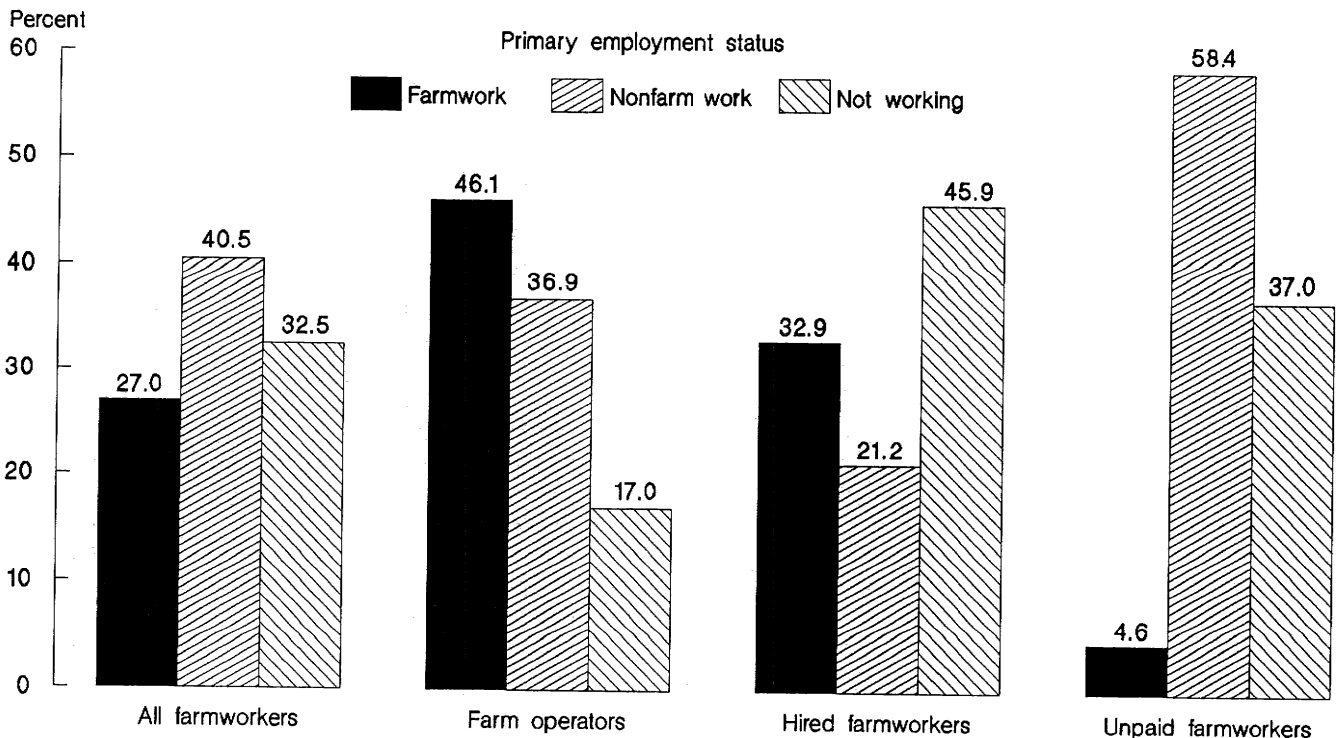
farm operators, 33 percent of the hired farmworkers, and only 5 percent of the unpaid farmworkers considered themselves primarily employed in farmwork. Most unpaid farmworkers (58 percent) were primarily nonfarm workers, while many hired farmworkers (46 percent) were unemployed or not in the labor force for most of the year.

## Dependence of Agricultural Work Force Households on Farmwork

The degree to which agricultural work force households depend on agriculture for employment is affected by whether farmwork is the primary employment of the farmworker and that farmworker's position in the household. We assumed that households where the head of house was primarily employed in farmwork were the most heavily dependent on farmwork for employment (high dependence). Somewhat less dependent on farmwork for employment were households in which someone other than the head was primarily employed in agriculture (moderate dependence). Households in which no one was primarily employed in agriculture were assumed to have a low dependence.

In 1985, slightly over 1.6 million agricultural work force households were highly dependent on agriculture for

Figure 3  
**Primary employment status of the agricultural work force, 1987**



employment. By 1987, this number had declined more than 10 percent to under 1.5 million (table 3). Two-thirds of high-dependence households were headed by a farm operator, and almost a third were headed by a hired farmworker (table 4). Over half of high-dependence households were on farms. Although high-dependence households accounted for only 27 percent of all agricultural work force households, members of these households worked 645 million days, or 58 percent of the total 1,115 million days of farmwork performed by all farmworkers in 1987 (table 4) (fig.4).<sup>2</sup> An annual average of 442 days of farmwork was performed by high-dependence households. Each farmworker in these households averaged 259 days of farmwork during the year.

Only 243,000 households (5 percent of the total) were moderately dependent on farmwork for employment in 1987, but this number had increased 24 percent since

<sup>2</sup>Days of farmwork refers to all types of farmwork, including operating a farm and hired or unpaid farmwork. The work may have been for all or only part of a day.

1985 (table 3). In 1987, 70 percent of these households were headed by a nonagricultural worker (table 4). One moderately dependent household in four was on a farm. An annual average of 354 days of farmwork was performed by moderate-dependence households. On average, each farmworker in these households spent 223 days doing farmwork during the year.

**Table 3—Changes in agricultural work force households by dependence on farmwork, 1985-87**

| Item                                   | 1985          | 1987  | Change  |
|--|---------------|-------|---------|
|  | --Thousands-- |       | Percent |
| Agricultural work force households     | 5,582         | 5,353 | -4.1    |
| Dependence on farmwork for employment: |               |       |         |
| High                                   | 1,624         | 1,458 | -10.2   |
| Moderate                               | 196           | 243   | 24.0    |
| Low                                    | 3,761         | 3,651 | -2.9    |

Source: The 1985 and 1987 Agricultural Work Force Surveys.

**Table 4—Agricultural work force households by dependence on farmwork for employment, 1987<sup>1</sup>**

| Characteristic                         | Total  | Dependence on farmwork for employment |          |        |
|--|--------|---------------------------------------|----------|--------|
|  |        | High                                  | Moderate | Low    |
| <b>Households</b>                      | 5,353  | 1,458                                 | 243      | 3,651  |
| Headed by: <sup>2</sup>                |        |                                       |          |        |
| Farm operators                         | 1,976  | 969                                   | 47       | 959    |
| Hired farmworkers                      | 912    | 436                                   | 9        | 467    |
| Unpaid farmworkers                     | 1,421  | 53                                    | 16       | 1,352  |
| Nonagricultural workers                | 1,044  | 0                                     | 170      | 873    |
| Farm residence:                        |        |                                       |          |        |
| Farm                                   | 1,262  | 805                                   | 59       | 399    |
| Nonfarm                                | 4,090  | 653                                   | 184      | 3,253  |
|  |        | <i>Millions</i>                       |          |        |
| Days of farmwork                       | 1,115  | 645                                   | 86       | 384    |
|  |        | <i>Days</i>                           |          |        |
| Average days of farmwork per household | 208    | 442                                   | 354      | 105    |
|  |        | <i>Thousands</i>                      |          |        |
| <b>Persons in households</b>           | 16,775 | 4,552                                 | 898      | 11,325 |
| <b>Farmworkers in households</b>       | 7,687  | 2,487                                 | 387      | 4,813  |
| Farm operators                         | 2,674  | 1,248                                 | 157      | 1,269  |
| Hired farmworkers                      | 2,160  | 777                                   | 158      | 1,225  |
| Unpaid farmworkers                     | 2,853  | 461                                   | 73       | 2,320  |
|  |        | <i>Days</i>                           |          |        |
| Average days of farmwork per worker    | 145    | 259                                   | 223      | 80     |

<sup>1</sup>Numbers may not add to totals due to rounding. <sup>2</sup>Refers to the major farmwork occupation of the head of household.

The largest number of households, 3.7 million or 68 percent of all agricultural work force households, depended little on farmwork for employment in 1987. This group declined about 3 percent from 1985 (table 3). A relatively large proportion of these households (37 percent) were headed by an unpaid farmworker in 1987 (table 4). Only 11 percent of low-dependence households were on a farm. An annual average of 105 days of farmwork was performed by low-dependence households. Farmworkers in these households averaged 80 days of farmwork during the year.

Not only did the distribution of agricultural work force households differ geographically, so did the degree to which these households depended on agriculture for employment. Although the eastern regions had more agricultural work force households (fig. 2), households in the Western United States were generally more likely to be highly dependent on agriculture for employment. About 38 percent of all agricultural work force households in the Northern Plains were highly dependent on agriculture for employment, as were 32 percent of the households in the Pacific region (table 5). On the other hand, households in Appalachia (19 percent) and the Northeast (22 percent) were the least likely to be highly dependent on agriculture for employment. An exception to the pattern of less dependent households being in the eastern regions was the Lake States region, which contained a large proportion (33 percent) of high-dependence households.

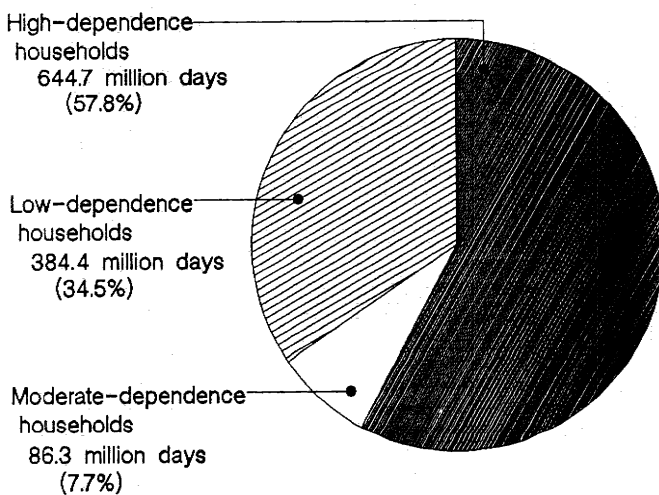
## Do Further Declines in Agricultural Employment Spell Trouble for Agricultural Work Force Households?

Employment in agriculture has declined dramatically over the last four decades, due in large part to trends toward fewer and larger farms and increased mechanization. Although the decline in farm employment has slowed in recent years, the number of farmworkers and farmworker households fell between 1985 and 1987. Factors such as technological innovations, farm legislation, foreign competition, farm prices, and immigration reform could cause further reductions in farm employment. What effect would these reductions, should they occur, have on employment in agricultural work force households?

The results of this study suggest that most households would be little affected by further declines in the demand for farm labor, but some households could be severely affected.<sup>3</sup> About 68 percent of all agricultural work force households had a low dependence on farmwork for employment, while 27 percent of all agricultural work force households were highly dependent. However, overall averages can mask the fact that some types of households would be affected more than others.

<sup>3</sup>This report does not attempt to predict which households are the most likely to experience farm job loss, but rather to determine which ones would be most affected should farm job loss occur.

Figure 4  
**Days of farmwork performed by farmworkers in high-, moderate-, and low-dependence households, 1987**



Total=1,115.4 million days.

**Table 5—Regional distribution of agricultural work force households by dependence on farmwork for employment, 1987<sup>1</sup>**

| Region          | Households<br><i>Thousands</i> | Dependence on farmwork for employment |          |      |
|-----------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------|------|
|                 |                                | High                                  | Moderate | Low  |
|                 |                                | -----Percent-----                     |          |      |
| United States   | 5,353                          | 27.2                                  | 4.5      | 68.2 |
| Northeast       | 561                            | 21.9                                  | 6.6      | 71.5 |
| Appalachia      | 682                            | 18.9                                  | 4.6      | 76.6 |
| Southeast       | 376                            | 28.4                                  | 6.5      | 65.1 |
| Delta States    | 267                            | 25.3                                  | 4.8      | 69.9 |
| Corn Belt       | 1,002                          | 27.3                                  | 4.4      | 68.3 |
| Lake States     | 656                            | 33.0                                  | 3.6      | 63.5 |
| Northern Plains | 366                            | 37.9                                  | 3.3      | 58.8 |
| Southern Plains | 488                            | 22.3                                  | 3.1      | 74.4 |
| Mountain        | 397                            | 29.6                                  | 3.4      | 67.0 |
| Pacific         | 557                            | 31.9                                  | 5.3      | 62.8 |

<sup>1</sup>Numbers and percentages may not add to totals due to rounding.

Most affected by the loss of farm jobs would be households headed by either a farm operator or hired farmworker and households on farms. Almost half of the households headed by farm operators (49 percent) or hired farmworkers (47 percent) were highly dependent on agriculture for employment. Forty-seven percent of all farm operators and 36 percent of all hired farmworkers lived in high-dependence households compared with only 16 percent of all unpaid farmworkers. Of the households on farms, 64 percent were highly dependent on farmwork for employment.

Farmworkers and their families are not the only persons affected by farm job loss. Rural communities with a large percentage of high-dependence households experiencing farm job loss face increased pressure on their nonfarm labor markets. Since a greater proportion of agricultural work force households in the Northern Plains, Pacific, Mountain, and Lake States are highly dependent on agriculture for employment, these regions are likely to be the most severely affected by farm job loss.

## Source of Data

The data in this report are from the Agricultural Work Force Survey (AWFS), a supplement of the December 1985 and December 1987 Current Population Surveys (CPS). The surveys were conducted by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Funding for the 1987 AWFS was provided by U.S. Department of Labor and for the 1985 AWFS by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

The CPS sample included households in all 50 States and the District of Columbia, but excluded Puerto Rico and other U.S. territories and possessions. In December 1987, approximately 57,000 households were interviewed. All persons 14 years of age and older in the interviewed households were asked a series of questions on their farmwork experiences during the year. Almost 5,300 persons living in about 3,600 households did farmwork at some time during 1987. Information from this sample of households was expanded to provide estimates of the total United States.

The AWFS may underestimate the total number of hired farmworkers for several reasons. Both foreign and domestic workers do hired farmwork in this country. The AWFS provides good coverage of domestic farmworkers, but counts few illegal aliens who did farmwork, because they either returned home before the survey was conducted in December or avoided being counted due to their illegal status. Also, the AWFS does not count foreign nationals who legally did hired farmwork, but returned home before the survey was conducted. About 22,600 U.S. farm jobs were certified for these foreign workers under the U.S. Department of Labor's H-2 and H-2A programs in 1987.

Data on the number of farm operators differ from data on the number of farms reported by statistical series, which use the farm rather than the operator as the unit of analysis. USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service counted 2,173,000 farms in the United States in 1987. The number of farm operators provided in this report includes everyone who said that he or she operated a farm during the year. The number of farm operators may be greater than the number of farms since two or more persons could operate one farm. Data from the 1987 AWFS show that over half a million households had more than one farm operator.



## Definitions

**Hired farmworkers.** Persons 14 years of age and older who did any farmwork for cash wages or salary at any time during the year.

**Farm operators.** Persons 14 years of age and older who operated a farm, ranch, nursery, or other agricultural enterprise which they owned, rented, or leased at any time during the year.

**Unpaid farmworkers.** Unpaid farmworkers (who may be family members, neighbors, or friends) are persons, other than farm operators, 14 years of age and older, who worked on a farm, ranch, or nursery without receiving cash wages or salary. Work done for a "token" cash allowance, for room and board, or for pay-in-kind if the worker does not receive cash wages or salary is defined as unpaid farmwork.

**Nonagricultural workers.** Persons who did not do any farmwork during 1987.

**Agricultural work force.** Includes farm operators, hired farmworkers, and unpaid farmworkers.

**Agricultural work force households.** Households in which a member does farmwork at any time during the year.

**Major farmwork occupation.** The farm occupation in which the worker worked the most days during 1987.

**Primary employment status.** Information on the primary employment status of farmworkers was derived from the question, "What was \_\_\_\_\_ doing during most of 1987—working, keeping house, going to school, or something else?" For purposes of this study, the responses were grouped into three categories: farmwork, nonfarmwork, and unemployed or not in labor force.

**Farm.** A place in a rural area selling \$1,000 or more of agricultural products during the preceding 12 months.

**Farm production region.** The States included in each of the 10 farm production regions are as follows:

- o *Northeast*—Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware;
- o *Lake States*—Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan;
- o *Corn Belt*—Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio;
- o *Northern Plains*—North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas;
- o *Appalachia*—Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina;
- o *Southeast*—South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Florida;
- o *Delta States*—Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas;
- o *Southern Plains*—Oklahoma and Texas;
- o *Mountain*—Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico; and
- o *Pacific*—Washington, Oregon, California, Hawaii, and Alaska.

### For Additional Information...

Contact Victor Oliveira (202/786-1933), Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Room 224, 1301 New York Avenue NW., Washington, DC 20005-4788.

### Also see...

Oliveira, V.J., and E. Jane Cox. *The Agricultural Work Force of 1987: A Statistical Profile*. AER-609. U.S. Dept. Agr., Econ. Res. Serv., May 1989.

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