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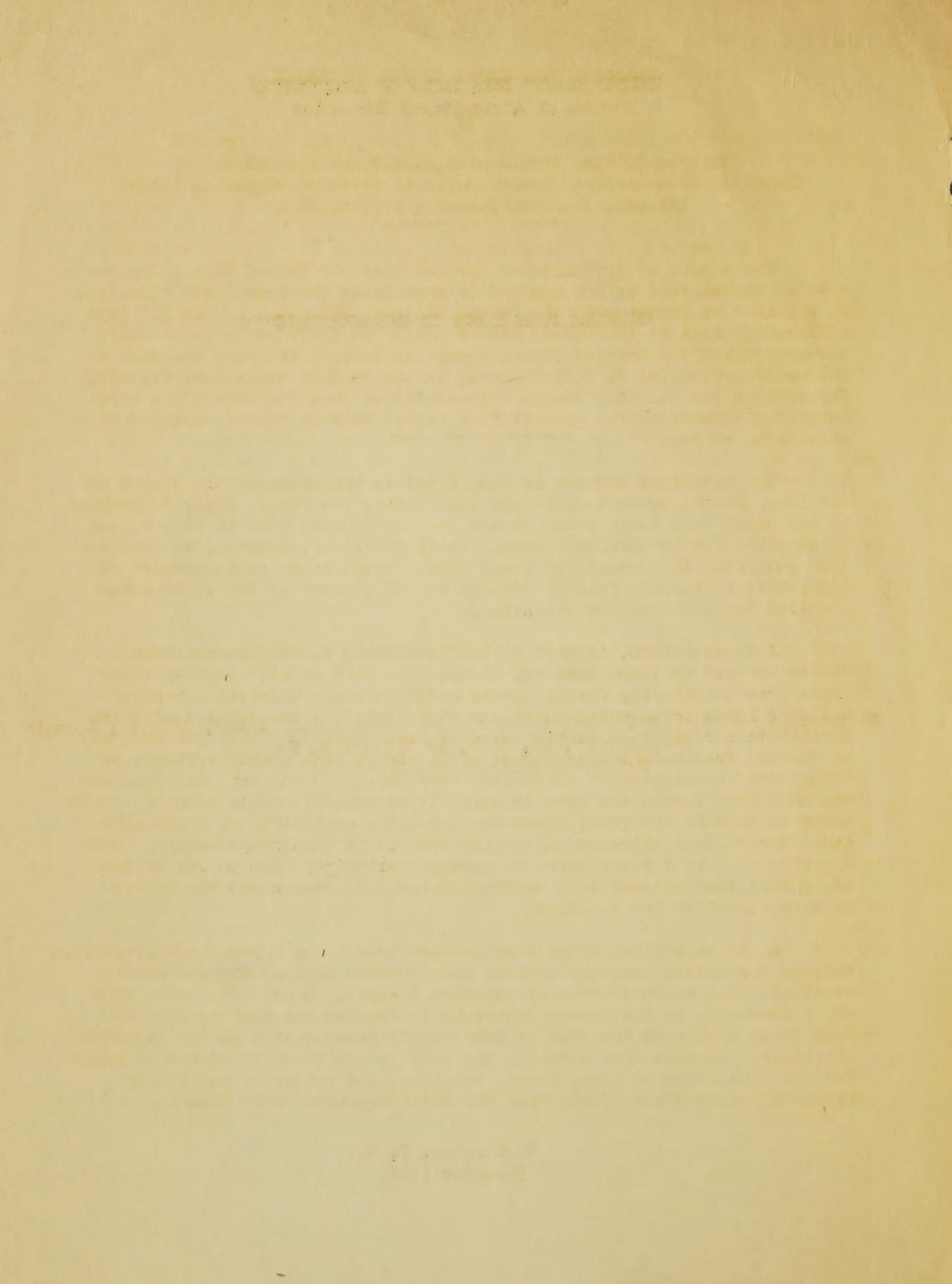
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SEASONAL FARM LABOR IN THE SOUTHEAST

Statement presented at Interstate Conference on Migratory Labor, Atlanta, Georgia  
December 17, 18, 1940, by William T. Ham  
Principal Agricultural Economist

Washington, D. C.  
December 1940.



## SEASONAL FARM LABOR IN THE SOUTHEAST

by

William T. Ham, Principal Agricultural Economist,  
Statement presented at Interstato Conference on Migratory Labor,  
Atlanta, Georgia, December 17, 18, 1940

The Bureau of Agricultural Economics of the United States Department of Agriculture is now engaged in appraising the farm labor situation in a number of counties in the United States. Fifty-two of the 100 type of farming areas in the United States are to be included in these rapid surveys during the current fiscal year. In Georgia the work was done in cooperation with Dr. W. T. Fullilove, of the Georgia Experiment Station. Information for the five States represented at this Conference has been hurriedly summarized for presentation here. Work in Florida has not been undertaken as yet.

The principal sources of farm labor in the Southeastern States are the farm and the areas immediately surrounding the farm. Fully 90 percent of the total farm labor needs in any type of farming area in this region is supplied from within that area. It is important, however, to consider the remaining 10 percent, or less, of the total labor needs because at times this represents from 25 percent to 100 percent of the total labor required for a given crop operation.

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A typical farm, in most of the localities in the Southeastern States covered by these surveys, secures the bulk of its seasonal labor force from neighboring farms. Large establishments maintain a regular resident labor force composed of men with families, the members of which constitute a readily available seasonal labor supply. Other laborers may be secured from neighboring farms; still others from nearby villages or towns; and occasionally a particular crop operation may call for laborers who come from beyond the area in which it is possible to go back and forth daily to work on the farm. Some crops require such nonlocal labor only under exceptional circumstances; with some it is regular procedure. Over a period of 2 or 3 years there is hardly a principal crop in any of the areas that does not use some nonlocal labor. In some cases the number of workers called for is large.

At harvest time, labor requirements lead to an interchange of workers between the cotton areas of central and northern Georgia and the cotton, vegetable, and tobacco areas of southern Georgia. Labor also moves from the latter area to the citrus districts in Florida and back again. In both these exchanges the flow of labor south exceeds that in the opposite direction. Florida also supplies the Carolinas with an abundance of labor for the harvesting of peas, beans, tomatoes, and potatoes; relatively little labor, however, moves from the Carolinas to work in Florida.

The workers who move from Georgia to Florida, although regarded in the latter State as migrants, are, for the most part, laborers who retain a definite status in the home counties to which they usually return. The labor which Florida supplies to Georgia and the Carolinas, on the other hand, is made up in large part of organized crews of migratory workers who specialize in particular types of work.

This free movement of workers between States has been going on for a long time. It appears, however, that labor is ranging farther and farther away from its home base. In some instances it follows regular routes, in other instances it seems to move at random. At the present time, such nonlocal labor appears to be declining in importance in North Carolina's potato harvest, while in South Carolina's peach area around Spartanburg the reverse is true. In this area it is anticipated that within 2 years a high proportion of the labor requirements of the peach harvest will be supplied by migrant labor. In Baldwin County, Ala., such labor appears to be increasingly in use in the harvests of potatoes and green corn.

Cotton presents a peculiar problem. Mechanization of cotton farms in the Southeast appears to be increasing rapidly. This process tends to emphasize the importance of the two periods of peak seasonal labor requirements, that of cotton chopping and hoeing on the one hand, and that of cotton picking on the other. More and more farmers are increasing the amount of hand labor employed during the seasonal peaks and decreasing the number of regular workers on the farm. The progress of mechanization appears to depend to some extent upon the presence of an available supply of seasonal laborers; on the other hand such a supply is created by mechanization. Thus it appears that we are now watching the beginnings of a migrant labor problem in the Southeastern cotton crop.

Six counties in Alabama have been surveyed. Two of them, Madison and Limestone, are in the Tennessee Valley cotton area. At the present time there is an increasing tendency to rely upon seasonal, rather than year-round labor, for cotton chopping and picking, but few of these workers are from outside the district. The supply of labor, indeed, is such that migratory workers are supplied to other areas. A few workers, for example, make annual treks into the Mississippi Delta areas for the cotton harvest. In addition there is a considerable out-movement of people who are leaving the area for good. The construction of dams on the Tennessee River has required that a large amount of farm land be taken over by the Tennessee Valley Authority. This Authority is making every effort to resettle the people affected; - a process which makes necessary some emigration of farm people.

In Chilton County, Alabama, a large number of seasonal workers are employed, but few of these come from outside the area. Such nonlocal

labor as is used is employed chiefly in the strawberry harvest. The migrant farm laborers who come in for that purpose are likely to be part of the group which follows the berries from Florida westward to the Mississippi Valley and on to Tennessee and Kentucky. During the early 1930's there was some exchange of labor between industrial centers outside of Chilton County and the farm area. A number of industrial workers from Birmingham, who were thrown out of jobs due to the depression, moved to this county and began working on farms. At the present time some of these workers are going back to the steel mills in Birmingham. During October, 1940, according to the Alabama Employment Service, 40 percent of the Shelby and Chilton County unemployment compensation claims were out-of-county claims. In November, 1940, 24.3 percent of the claims were of this sort. This means that people living within these two counties, many of them farm people, work at certain periods in covered industries in other localities; when they become unemployed they return to their homes in Shelby and Chilton Counties.

In Lowndes County, Ala., a large amount of local seasonal farm labor is used but none of outside origin. This area supplies seasonal farm labor to other nearby districts. The change in the type of agriculture which is now going on in the Black Belt of Alabama, will undoubtedly increase the amount of movement out of the area. The reduction in acres devoted to cotton is exceeding the reduction required under the Cotton Control Program; farmers are shifting rapidly to livestock. This will mean a considerable reduction in local need for laborers who must seek work elsewhere.

In Baldwin County, Ala., local seasonal and migrant labor is used in abundance during the planting and harvesting of potatoes in February and in June and July, respectively; in the harvesting of green corn in May and June; in the harvesting of watermelons in June and July; and in the harvesting of cotton in August, September, October, and November. It is estimated that around 2,300 migrant laborers come into this county in May and June and that during only 4 of the 12 months are no migrants at work. The nonlocal laborers come from surrounding counties and from Southern Florida.

In Mobile County, Ala., a large amount of local seasonal labor is used but it is believed that no nonlocal labor is employed on farms in this county. In fact, this county supplies some of the labor for Baldwin County.

Four counties in the Georgia peach area, Henry, Spalding, Upson and Peach, employ a large amount of seasonal labor in the peach harvest and at cotton-picking time. No migratory labor is used except during the peach harvest and very little then. For example, it is reported that in

Spalding County only from 40 to 100 workers are secured from Florida; that in Peach County only 15 of the 150 nonlocal laborers used in grading peaches are from Florida; and that in Upson County only about 13 of the 130 peach graders are migrants. This area, however, supplies regions further south with citrus, vegetable, and cotton laborers.

In Tift, Berrien, Colquitt, Thomas, and Mitchell Counties, Ga., some migrant laborers are employed in picking cotton and harvesting tobacco. In Mitchell County a few are reported as working in the tomato grading and packing sheds. A large part of this migrant labor comes from central Georgia, particularly from Peach and Upson Counties, with a small part from Florida. Each of these counties supply some labor to Florida during the citrus harvest season. These workers remain in Florida from the close of the Georgia cotton and peanut harvest seasons until the spring plowing season begins at home.

In Dougherty and Sumter Counties no nonlocal labor is used but from the latter county many migrant laborers move to Florida, remaining during the citrus season, then returning home to their regular farm places.

In Spartanburg County, S. C., no nonlocal labor is used except in peach harvest. About 5 percent of the peach harvest hands came from areas beyond daily commuting distance to the farm. Most of these pickers are from Georgia and Florida. In addition, between 10 and 15 percent of the peach graders and packers also come from the same States. There is some exchange of labor between Spartanburg and the adjoining county in North Carolina, the workers traveling daily across the State line to the farms where they work.

At the present time there are approximately 22,500 acres of peaches in Spartanburg County with approximately 2,250,000 trees. Less than 40 percent of the trees are of bearing age. By 1942 there will be nearly 2 million bearing trees in this county and it is expected that at that time between 25 and 50 percent of the peach harvest labor must come from outside the area of production. As an indication of the rapid growth of peach production, it may be noted that in 1938, Spartanburg County had only 15,000 acres of peach trees. By January, 1940, there were 20,000 acres; acreage is now estimated to be 22,500. Eighty-five percent of the peaches are harvested between July 25 and August 10 so it is to be expected that by 1942 the Spartanburg area will be using a very large amount of migratory labor during this 2-week period.

Allendale, Bamberg and Barnwell Counties constitute a relatively new vegetable area in South Carolina. The survey in Barnwell County showed that a certain amount of seasonal labor is employed during the

harvest of asparagus and cotton but that little or no migrant labor is employed. Florence County, S. C., is, for the most part, devoted to tobacco production, but cotton and vegetables are also grown. A large amount of seasonal labor is employed during the harvest of cotton and vegetables but none of the migratory type. Charleston County, S. C., employs an abundance of seasonal labor throughout the year. Migrant labor, however, is used only in the potato harvest and at tomato packing time, the workers being of the group which follows the harvest of these crops from Florida up the Eastern shore to South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, and New Jersey.

In Pender and Duplin Counties, N. C., a large number of seasonal laborers are employed in the harvest of strawberries, dewberries, beans, potatoes, tomatoes, tobacco, and cotton; some 300 to 700 of whom are from outside the area. The peak occurs between May and June, when there is some overlapping in the harvests of strawberries, dewberries, and potatoes.

Reports from Beaufort County, N. C., indicate that the only crop which requires labor to be brought in from the outside is white potatoes. Some 1,200 are required at Aurora, of whom about 300 are of local origin. About 500 come in under contract from outside the State, for the most part negro laborers from Florida. In recent years farmers are said to give preference, as more dependable and efficient, to crews from within the State.

In Moore County, N. C., the peach crop requires seasonal labor in considerable volume. Before 1930 about a quarter of this labor came in as skilled packers and graders from Florida. At the present time, however, the basket system having displaced the box system, local workers care for the crop in its entirety. These workers are secured from nearby cotton areas with towns having a large colored population which, during the winter or resort season, is in large part employed in various forms of domestic service.

#### HOUSING:

Housing of farm workers throughout these States is unsatisfactory. In almost every area the houses are old and in bad repair. The only facilities available to migrant workers are their own tents or trailers, vacant buildings, barns, tobacco houses, and open camps. In some areas, as in Baldwin County, Ala., local recognition of this need is apparent. In the Spartanburg, S. C. peach area, it is anticipated that there will be a need for housing facilities for migrant workers within the next year or two.

In most of the areas visited in the five States, little effort is being made to maintain houses for regular laborers and tenants. On many farms former tenant houses are being occupied by seasonal laborers; this

is particularly true of the areas where mechanization is progressing, that is, Madison, Limestone, Chilton and Lowndes Counties in Alabama.

METHOD OF SECURING LABOR:

The State Employment Services in the Southeastern States are placing comparatively few of the workers on farms. Because of the practice of calling upon neighboring farm families to assist for wages, in various farm operations, and because of the fact that almost all of these areas have an abundance of labor more accessible to the farm than is the Farm Employment Service office, farmers in general find it convenient to secure their labor by personal search rather than by using the employment service. Local employment service offices report that farmers sometimes call upon them to supply their labor needs but that this is done only after the farmer has himself made other attempts. Labor agents are hired in Spalding, Upson, Tift, Colquitt, Thomas and Sumter Counties, Ga., and in Pender and Duplin Counties, N. C. Labor contractors are used in Pender, Duplin, Moore and Beaufort Counties, N. C., and in Charleston, S.C.