

ADVANCING FARMWORKER SAFETY AND WELL-BEING

PLATFORM RECOMMENDATIONS AT-A-GLANCE

- Increase Investment in Farmworker Workforce Development and Innovative Partnerships
- Develop New Farmworker Housing Units and Improve Existing Housing Stock
- Fund Unemployment, Food, and Health Access for Farmworkers
- Increase Farmworker Wages and Reform Federal Immigration Policy

A CLIMATE PLATFORM FOR CALIFORNIA AGRICULTURE

This is one in a series of CalCAN policy briefs that describe approaches to moving California agriculture boldly and quickly toward a carbon-neutral and climate-resilient future. Together, they make up *A Climate Platform for California Agriculture*.

Access the full report at: calclimateag.org/ca-agriculture-climate-platform



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INTRODUCTION

California is a diverse and large agricultural state with a Mediterranean climate, which allows for the production of specialty crops that are dependent upon seasonal hand labor. As a result, California is home to the largest farmworker population of any state in the country. It is estimated that there are between 400,000 to 800,000 farmworkers in the state, many of whom are undocumented and living in poverty.¹⁶⁷

A climate-resilient agricultural economy in California will require a secure and resilient agricultural workforce. But much work is needed to achieve this. In recent years, farm labor shortages following anti-immigration federal policies combined with significant health impacts on workers from the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the vulnerabilities of the state's farm workforce.¹⁶⁸



Photo Credit: USDA Photo by Lance Cheung

Climate change further exacerbates farmworker vulnerabilities. As essential frontline workers, farmworkers are at great risk of experiencing the health effects of greater weather extremes, including heat and wildfire smoke.¹⁶⁹ Recent research found that respiratory-related hospitalizations attributed to wildfire smoke were 10 times higher than those attributed to non-smoke, bad-air days in Southern California.¹⁷⁰ Farmworkers also face a greater risk of heat-related death, a 20- to 35-fold increase compared to other workers.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁷ Martin, P. L., et al. (2017). [How many workers are employed in California agriculture?](#) *California Agriculture*, 71(1).

¹⁶⁸ Bhattarai, A., & Gurley, L. K. (2020, December 15). [Trump, covid slowed down immigration. Now employers can't find workers.](#) *The Washington Post*.

¹⁶⁹ Gross, L. (2021, September 21). [Fires fuel new risks to California farmworkers.](#) *Inside Climate News*.

¹⁷⁰ Aguilera, R., et al. (2021). [Wildfire smoke impacts respiratory health more than fine particles from other sources: Observational evidence from Southern California.](#) *Nature Communications*, 12.

¹⁷¹ Jackson, L., & Rosenberg, H. (2010). [Preventing heat-related illness among agricultural workers.](#) *Journal of Agromedicine*, 15(3).

Farmworkers face these safety challenges not only in the fields but also at home. A 2018 study found that 67 percent of farmworker households experienced severe overcrowding in the Salinas and Pajaro Valley Region.¹⁷² The same study found that 5,300 permanent and affordable farmworker housing units are needed in the region. Furthermore, inadequate HVAC systems in existing farmworker homes mean that many farmworkers are vulnerable to extreme heat when they come home from the fields.

We spoke with farmworker advocates on how to advance farmworker safety and well-being to achieve a more resilient and secure farm labor workforce. Below we offer our findings and recommendations.

FINDINGS

Farmworker Workforce Development Tied to Need for Improved Wages to Adapt to New Climate Realities

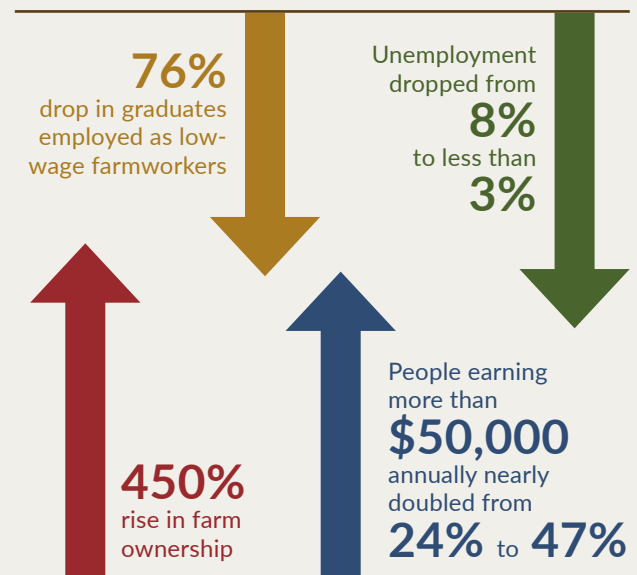
We heard from interviewees that farmworkers are already experiencing the impacts of a changing climate and related job losses. California's recent drought resulted in land fallowing in 2022, especially in the Central Valley, impacting farmworker jobs. Excessive heat events have also impacted the health and well-being of farmworkers and their families. Recent floods have devastated farmworker homes in the Central Valley and on the Central Coast.

There is interest among farmworker advocacy organizations to develop workforce training options that support farmworkers in building farm management skills that support climate resilience (e.g., irrigation management, sustainable pest management, and pest monitoring), protect farmworkers from climate harms, and result in improved pay.

We heard from our interviewees that traditional workforce development through community colleges is inadequate for farmworkers. Many farmworkers lack the immigration status and education level that would allow them to participate in community college courses. Taking time away from work and losing associated wages also limits the ability of farmworkers to receive additional training. We heard that alternative models—often run by nonprofits that offer bilingual training (including multiple indigenous languages) and can compensate for the loss of wages—are more likely to be successful.

An example of a farmworker training resource is the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA)¹⁷³ in Salinas, CA. ALBA has incubated over 220 organic farm businesses, 85 percent of which are Latino-owned. Such programs require funding and partnerships to support farmworkers in receiving training that will improve their farm management skills and result in higher pay. Such partnerships will require working with farmers to identify needs and pay structures that compensate workers fairly.

ALBA's 20-year impact report found the following changes reported by graduates of their incubator program:



¹⁷² California Institute for Rural Studies. (2018). [Farmworker housing study and action plan for Salinas Valley and Pajaro Valley](#).

¹⁷³ For more about ALBA, visit www.albafarmers.org



Safe, Affordable Homes Needed

Overcrowded housing with improper ventilation contributes to the high risks of airborne illnesses, including COVID-19 infections, among farmworkers and their families in California.¹⁷⁴ Furthermore, improper HVAC systems in existing farmworker homes put families at risk of heat events when proper cooling is not available. We heard about the importance of moving away from dormitory-style housing for single men that has been developed in some areas for workers with temporary H2A work permits and instead developing multi-unit, family housing for farmworkers and their households. AB 1654 (R. Rivas),¹⁷⁵ signed into law in 2022, requires the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) to commission a study by the end of 2023 on the outstanding needs for farmworker housing.¹⁷⁶ The study should inform but not delay additional investments in farmworker housing and related investments in efficient HVAC systems.

The Food and Farm Resilience Coalition, working with Assemblymember Robert Rivas, was the lead advocate for the successful inclusion of \$200 million in the state budget for the Joe Serna Jr. Farmworker Housing Grant Program at HCD over two years (2021–22 and 2022–23). However, no additional funds were included in the state’s 2023–24 budget.

Farmworker Families Need Access to Culturally Appropriate Health Care, Nutritious Food

The COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted the inadequate health care system for farmworkers and their families. We heard from interviewees about the initial difficulties of providing vaccine information and access to farmworkers. Adequate access to community clinics and hospitals is essential for farmworkers and their families. The closing of Madera Community Hospital in March 2023 has been especially hard on the farmworker families that the community hospital once served. Moreover, many farmworker families rely on food banks. We heard from advocates that to bring dignity and access to culturally appropriate, healthy food, the state should remove policy barriers to undocumented workers accessing the state’s food assistance program.



Photo Credit: USDA Photo by Lance Cheung

¹⁷⁴ California Institute for Rural Studies. (2020). [Increased risks and fewer jobs: Evidence of California farmworker vulnerability during the COVID-19 pandemic.](#)

¹⁷⁵ AB 1654 text is available [here](#).

¹⁷⁶ California Institute for Rural Studies. (2020). [Increased risks and fewer jobs: Evidence of California farmworker vulnerability during the COVID-19 pandemic.](#)



Disaster Pay Needed

The COVID-19 pandemic had significant impacts on farmworkers who continued working and living in crowded conditions. A study done in Monterey County found that farmworkers in the county were three times more likely to contract the virus than non-farmworkers.¹⁷⁷ The vast majority of farmworkers who are undocumented are not eligible for unemployment pay when they are unable to work because of illness or extreme weather events like floods or wildfires. We heard from interviewees that disaster pay is critical for farmworker families, many of whom are food insecure and live on the edge of extreme poverty. A legislative proposal would create an unemployment fund for farmworkers, which our interviewees said was a critical step toward achieving a more resilient agricultural workforce in the state.¹⁷⁸

RECOMMENDATIONS

Develop New Farmworker Housing Units and Improve Existing Housing Stock

To make it possible for farmworkers and their families to thrive and participate in the agricultural economy, adequate housing that protects from heat events is essential.¹⁷⁹ Recent state investments in the Joe Serna Jr. Farmworker Housing Grant Program¹⁸⁰ and the farmworker component of the Low-Income Home Weatherization Program¹⁸¹ are great starts to this effort. But more is needed. We recommend the state establish a target of 2,500 new farmworker housing units annually from now until 2030, which would require an investment of roughly \$200 million per year. These efforts should be part of the state's larger efforts to support affordable, in-fill housing that is connected to transit and services. Given the state's recent multi-billion dollar housing budgets, this is a small piece of the state's overall efforts to address urgent affordable housing needs. We also recommend \$25 million annually for the Farmworker Component of the Low-Income Home Weatherization Program to support ongoing energy efficiency and HVAC improvement of existing farmworker housing.



Photo Credit: Mutual Housing California

Zero net energy affordable housing project for farmworker families in Woodland, CA.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Foy, N. (2023, February 16). [Floods, fires, droughts show California needs bigger safety net for farmworkers, advocates say.](#) *CalMatters*.

¹⁷⁹ Quandt, S. A., et al. (2013). [Heat index in migrant farmworker housing: Implications for rest and recovery from work-related heat stress.](#) *Am J. Public Health*, 103(8). e24–e26.



Increase Investment in Farmworker Workforce Development and Innovative Partnerships

As climate change brings more challenges to farmers, there is a growing need for farm managers and workers with the skills and expertise to manage farm operations in resilient ways, addressing water, soils, and biodiversity needs. To address these issues, farmworker workforce development is an ongoing need. Building upon the High Roads Partnership effort underway in the state, the state can seek out a diversity of partners to reach farmworkers. This effort cannot rely on a traditional model of community colleges that may constrain the participation of immigrants and non-native speakers with limited traditional education backgrounds. Nonprofits and community development corporations may be best suited to develop models that lead to training and career pathways for farmworkers to build climate-resilient farm management skills or to transition to farm ownership or into other agricultural careers such as technical assistance.

Fund Unemployment, Food, and Health Access for Farmworkers

All California workers, regardless of immigration status, should have access to unemployment when illness or disaster strikes and they are unable to work. We support efforts to establish unemployment funds for those undocumented workers. We also support efforts to allow undocumented farmworkers access to the state's food assistance program, CalFresh. The expansion of Medi-Cal benefits to undocumented workers has been a significant improvement for farmworkers and their families, but regional disparities continue and must be addressed. Such investments in unemployment and food assistance for farmworkers and their families can alleviate poverty, uplift families and their children, and avoid the long-term costs of communities impacted by extreme income disparities.

Increase Farmworker Wages and Reform Federal Immigration Policy

Ultimately, we need an agricultural system where farmers receive a fair price for their products and farmworkers receive a fair wage for their work. Fixes to the labor shortages that rely on bringing in guest workers without their families only perpetuate the disparities and harms that farmworkers experience. True immigration reform should give a path to legalized citizenship. As members of the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, we support their principles for immigration reform.¹⁸² We must bring together the needs of farmers and farmworkers to achieve an economy that is based on dignity, climate resilience, and justice for all.



¹⁸⁰ [Joe Serna, Jr. Farmworker Housing Grant Program](#)

¹⁸¹ [Farmworker Component of the Low Income Home Weatherization Program](#)

¹⁸² NSAC [Principles on Immigration Reform](#), adopted April 2013.

