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<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/31/business/economy/competing-views-on-how-to-regulate-illegal-migration.html?_r=2>

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Rather than substituting for illegal migration, the Bracero Program set the stage for large scale illegal Mexico-United States migration via two major channels. First, the availability of braceros combined with water projects and the Interstate System of highways allowed labor-intensive agriculture to expand far away from consumers, so that California replaced New Jersey as the nation’s garden state. Second, Mexican workers and United States farmers gained experience working with one another, a mutual dependence they were reluctant to end.

Nevertheless, there was not an immediate upsurge in illegal migration after the Bracero Program ended. Instead, farm wages jumped 40 percent, from $1.25 to $1.75 an hour in the United Farm Worker grape contracts of 1966. The lack of braceros prompted a wave of labor-saving mechanization, including forklifts in the fields to move 1,000-pound bins of produce, and the mechanization of the tomato harvest. Modern personnel management, such as scheduling work carefully and identifying and retaining the best workers, permitted fewer workers to do the work.

There are three important lessons from developments in the farm labor market after the Bracero Program. First, economic principles worked, as a reduced supply of labor led to higher wages that primarily reduced the demand for farm workers. Second, farm employers began to treat more expensive workers better, adding benefits such as health insurance and pensions to retain experienced workers. Third, farmers anticipating ever-higher wages sponsored research on labor-saving mechanization, so that one major study predicted there would soon be no hand-labor jobs on farms.

Rising unauthorized migration in the 1970s reversed these trends. One example tells the story. In the late 1960s, the citrus industry supported 70-odd projects aimed at harvesting oranges mechanically; by 1980, this industry support ended. Increases in unauthorized migration stabilized labor costs and reversed grower incentives to treat farm labor as an ever-rising cost.

Today we are at another farm labor inflection point, and [farm employers are responding with the four strategies](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/events/farm-table-role-immigrants-us-farm-labor-2016) expected by rising labor costs: satisfy current workers to retain them on the farm work longer, stretch their productivity with mechanical aids that raise productivity, substitute machines for workers where possible and supplement the aging work force with younger H-2A guest workers. Just as in the mid-1960s, the farm labor market today is responding to rising wages as economics predicts, making it hard to understand the call for new and untested guest worker programs.

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