

“FarmCorps”: A National Service Program in Agricultural Labor for Youth?

Brent Ranalli

The Cadmus Group

Abstract: The United States agriculture sector faces a looming labor shortfall. Who will bring in the harvest? In this essay, Brent Ranalli argues for the creation of a voluntary national service program to engage youth in seasonal agricultural work. Such a program would bridge the labor gap with a segment of the workforce that is fit for the task. It would also provide educational opportunities and a stepping stone to careers in farming and allied fields, and restore dignity to an indispensable form of labor.

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*Brent Ranalli is an environmental policy analyst at The Cadmus Group and a Prince Edward Senior Fellow with the MIT International Development Initiative. With experience in classroom and field-based education, he co-edits the environmental studies textbook *Environment: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* for Yale University Press and is a regular contributor at *TheGlobalist.com*. He welcomes correspondence at brent{dot}ranalli{at}gmail{dot}com.*

We left in droves, pushed out by machines. Whereas a century ago 50% of Americans lived in rural areas and 30% of the workforce was directly employed in agriculture, today only about 2% of Americans live on farms and agriculture occupies less than 2% of the national workforce.¹ This is usually seen as progress: industrialization in the field has freed up labor for other pursuits, for urban employment in the factory and the office.

But despite all the mechanization that has taken place on the farm, there remains an irreducible residue of tasks that can only be performed by human hands, notably in the harvesting of fruits and vegetables. This is seasonal work, and generally requires the laborer to move on from one location to another, never putting down roots, always being a stranger. It is physically taxing. The hours are long, and the work schedule is entirely at the mercy of the weather. The pay is lousy. And there are few or no opportunities for advancement.

Who would do such work? Throughout much of the 20th century, it was generally the most downtrodden and demoralized among us, poor citizens and immigrants who were practically invisible in the national consciousness and without a voice in discussions of agricultural and labor policy.² In recent years, the labor pool has shifted to an even more marginalized group, illegal migrant workers from Mexico. Since around 2000, about half of hired U.S. crop farm-workers have been undocumented Mexican workers.³

But today the population of farm laborers, native and foreign, is aging and not being replenished. By 2007, the average age of a farm worker in California's Imperial Valley was over 50 and local growers estimated a 15% labor shortfall, costing hundreds of thousands of dollars in unpicked crops that year.⁴ In states like Alabama and Georgia that have cracked down hard on undocumented Mexican workers, producers are positively desperate to find replacements, and Americans are not stepping up in anything like the numbers required.⁵ Tens of thousands of temporary foreign agricultural workers are flown in to the U.S. each year from as far away as South Africa to help make up the deficit under H2A visas, and producers must wade through a sea of red tape to get them.

Clearly, this is not sustainable. Those who lobby for stricter border control have argued that removing illegal Mexicans from the farm would create employment for American citizens, but it turns out the wages that producers are able to offer, dictated by the global marketplace, are simply not enough to entice many Americans to take up the basket and the crate—especially given the tough work conditions and the (for some) perceived indignity. Technological optimists might dream that in the coming years we will solve the labor shortage problem by breeding machine-harvestable, non-bruising tomatoes and apples. But a far likelier future scenario is that as we shift away from fossil fuels (proactively, in response to climate change, or reactively, in response to Peak Oil), and we reduce our reliance on heavy machinery and chemical inputs, we will need *more* human hands on the farm to do many of the tasks that human hands have traditionally done. Where will we find those farm workers?

As environmental educators, we can look at this problem as an opportunity. The demographic shift away from the farm has come with cultural costs. No previous generation in our history--arguably, no nation of significant size in all of world history--has ever managed to become as alienated from the land as we have. In *The Unsettling of America*, Wendell Berry observes that

as long as “the governing human metaphor was pastoral or agricultural, . . . it clarified, and so preserved in human care, the natural cycles of birth, growth, death, and decay.” To the extent we have lost access to that metaphor, Berry argues, “we have eliminated any fear or awe or reverence or humility or delight or joy that might have restrained us in our use of the world.”⁶ We know that awe and reverence and delight in the natural world lie right below the surface and will readily germinate and flower in pedagogical and recreational contexts, but we also know that we are fighting an uphill battle as educators. As a people we lack the cultural resources to grapple with issues like hydrofracking except in economic terms. We lack the moral imagination, rooted in somatic experience, to perceive the costs of practices like mountaintop removal mining.

What better way could there be, I ask, to get students re-engaged with the natural world than to get them down in the dirt on a working farm? That’s what I call experiential education for sustainability.

For that matter, what other segment of the population is fitter to perform the work? Youth and young adults are in their physical prime. For a youth without dependents, a farm laborer’s wage (comparable to an entry-level wage in retail) will not represent a gross indignity or hardship. And whereas older adults are likely to be tied down in one place, young adults are more likely to be mobile, even footloose, looking for adventure, new scenery, and camaraderie. To be sure, bringing in the harvest will not be every young person’s cup of tea. But there will undoubtedly be many who would find a season of agricultural labor an attractive alternative to a season working in retail or fast food.

In fact, it is a historical aberration for youth *not* to be involved in agricultural labor. The traditional summer vacation was originally a time when children were expected to help their parents with farmwork. David E. Schob⁷ has documented that during the westward expansion of Euro-America in the 1800s, boys and girls frequently were employed on the farms of family and neighbors. When they were old enough, young men often set out as migrant farm workers: to escape from the home environment, to see the world, to learn new skills, to earn enough to set up a farm of their own. Groups of them formed teams that traversed the young Midwestern states from south to north as the grain ripened each season, reaping and baling as they went. Young women left home for employment on farms as well.

Now as then, adolescence and young adulthood are not only a period for footloose rambling, they are also an age of idealism and career contemplation. For some young people, a season of agricultural labor might open new vistas of purpose and career aspirations.

I am a child of suburbia myself. I grew up in a town with crowded malls and few sidewalks. I had very little contact with the rural life until I was half a world away, during a college summer, in Eastern Europe. I lived with a farming family, and I was so impressed by the groundedness (for lack of a better word) of those people, and so captivated by the drama of the unfolding fate of the family farm in the midst of post-socialist reforms, that I ended up returning and making a study of prospects for rural sustainable development in the region.⁸ I visited every ecovillage and sustainable development pilot project I could. On these visits I earned my keep by exchanging labor—a new and personally valuable experience. I earned a degree in environmental science and policy at a nearby international university, and I have been working in the environmental

field since. The epiphany of a suburban kid’s brief and heady encounter with the land launched me on a career in sustainability education and policy. What could it do for thousands of others?

We might earnestly hope that it will inspire a new wave of smart, ambitious young people to take up farming as a vocation. Farmers too, not just their hired workers, are an aging demographic. Among current farm operators in the U.S., the average age has been rising steadily for decades and has now surpassed 57 years.⁹ Thirty percent of farm assets are held by farmers age 65 or older, and in the upcoming wave of retirements only a little over half of those farmers are in a position to pass the reins on to family members.¹⁰ There will be an opening for an entrepreneurial new cohort, ready to take on not only the physically demanding and financially precarious aspects of the farming profession, but also the heady challenge of forging new, more sustainable ways (in some cases, a reconstruction of old, time-tested ways) of working with the land as we transition away from fossil fuels. And that new generation of farmers will need the support of policymakers who understand the problems they face (starting with expanded programs to enable energetic but undercapitalized young farmers to take over the management of high-priced farmland in the first place) as well as extension workers, advocates, and an educated customer base.¹¹

The current U.S. agricultural scene is heterogeneous as never before. Large conglomerates experiment with progressive, innovative pest control techniques as well as genetically modified organisms. Some organic producers are at the forefront of the transition away from fossil fuels, while others are among the most industrialized and mechanized. Producers of almost every type and size and philosophy need seasonal help. Participation as a migrant laborer would provide a golden opportunity for the prospective farmer, policymaker, or advocate to be exposed to a wide variety of crops, farming philosophies and practices, and labor management styles.

How are we to entice youth into the field? I propose that we should treat agricultural labor as a national service, and organize and reward it accordingly. The program—let’s call it “FarmCorps”—might look something like this: High school graduates who sign up would be organized in teams that would travel together and work together for a harvest season under the supervision of crew leaders with appropriate qualifications.¹² Especially at the pilot stage the program would be highly selective in terms of participant motivation, reliability, and physical fitness, to ensure that the educational goals of the program are met and provide assurance to producers that it is worth their while to take a chance on teams consisting mostly of greenhorns.¹³ The participants would earn market wage, and also receive a higher-education incentive, much as do youth who perform national service in the military or programs such as Americorps. The organizers and a growing network of alumni and interested producers will debrief participants at the end of the season and help them find the educational opportunities, year-round work opportunities, and entrepreneurial resources they need to further explore the field and start them on their way toward careers. Given current labor shortage patterns, experienced farm workers are unlikely to be displaced by the program. Some will be eligible to participate in it; others may take on leadership and instructional roles.

As the program expands, individual campuses could organize their own local chapters and develop long-term relationships with local producers for mutual benefit. Producers will have a reliable, reputable source of local seasonal labor. Schools will have new service-learning

opportunities that could be linked up with classroom teaching. Programs could be developed for incoming students, along the lines of the late-summer Outward-Bound-style hiking and camping programs that are already available to first-year students on many campuses.

The result will be a spearhead of educated, articulate young adults with direct knowledge of our agricultural system from the bottom up, fit to reform it to meet the challenges of the coming decades, and an entire generation of college-educated young adults that will have had an opportunity to experience agricultural production first-hand. This will be the generation that turns the tide, knowing more about the nation's life-support system than its parents rather than less. We can expect to see long-overdue reforms in agricultural labor conditions, from living facilities to pesticide practices, as articulate youth, universities, and parents take a closer look and a keener interest in those conditions. We can expect a shift in perception about agricultural labor, from the dirty underbelly of our national economy, from which we avert our gaze, to work that is valued, dignified, and respected as a true national service.

¹ USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (<http://www.csrees.usda.gov/qlinks/extension.html>), last updated April 19, 2011; USEPA "Ag 101" (<http://www.epa.gov/oecaagct/ag101/demographics.html>), last updated June 27, 2012; Carolyn Dimitri et al., "The 20th Century Transformation of U.S. Agriculture and Farm Policy," USDA Economic Research Service, June 2005 (http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/259572/eib3_1_.pdf)

² G. Thomas-Lycklama à Nijeholt, *On the Road for Work: Migratory Workers on the East Coast of the United States* (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980); William H. Friedland and Dorothy Nelkin, *Migrant Agricultural Workers in America's Northeast* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971).

³ USDA Economic Research Service. Farm Labor: Background. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/farm-economy/farm-labor/background.aspx>. Last updated July 23, 2012.

⁴ Nick Taborek, "Farmers fret over aging workforce in the fields," May 21, 2007, Medill Reports (<http://news.medill.northwestern.edu/washington/news.aspx?id=36743>).

⁵ Elizabeth Dwoskin, "Why Americans won't do dirty jobs," Bloomberg Business, November 11, 2011 (http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/45246594/ns/business-us_business/t/why-americans-wont-do-dirty-jobs/)

⁶ Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), p. 56.

⁷ David E. Schob. *Hired Hands and Plowboys: Farm Labor in the Midwest, 1815-60*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975.

⁸ Brent Ranalli, "Hungary for Organics," *News From Below*, 1(2):15-27 (spring 2003).

⁹ USDA, 2009. 2007 Census of Agriculture: United States Summary and State Data, Vol. 1. Table 1.

¹⁰ Robert Hoppe and David E. Banker, Structure and Finances of U.S. Farms: Family Farm Report, 2010 Edition. Economic Information Bulletin No. (EIB-66) 72 pp, July 2010, p. 25.

¹¹ For analysis and recommendations, see the National Young Farmers' Coalition's November 2011 report, *Building a Future with Farmers: Challenges Faced by Young, American Farmers and a National Strategy to Help Them Succeed*

(<http://www.youngfarmers.org/newsroom/building-a-future-with-farmers-october-2011/>).

¹² According to federal law, youths age 16 and older are eligible to freely participate in the agricultural labor market.

¹³ Though harvest work is repetitive, there is a learning curve. Experienced hands acquire "considerable" skill and can outperform novices in terms of both speed and stamina (Friedland and Nelkin, p. 70).