

FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

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FOOD AND AG CLUSTER WORKFORCE

Business Nexus

The Greater Sacramento Region's vibrant Food and Ag Cluster (production, processing, distribution, and support activities) has more than 55,000 workers and generates more than \$12.2 billion in direct economic impact to the California Capital Region.

The Food and Ag industry is highly productive, helping feed not only the region but the nation and beyond. It is a core sector for the region's Economic Development Administration (EDA) funded Prosperity Strategy (Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy/CEDS). The industry was identified by the Brookings Institution as a vital competitive advantage cluster. The sustainability of our Food and Ag Industry is in jeopardy given current workforce shortages; specifically, farmers, farm labor, and manufacturing workers are in short supply.

Given advances in automation, AI and other technologies, the Food and Ag industries have incorporated digital advances for production and manufacturing. The incorporation of technology in this growing economic sector requires digital competency to meet production demands. Strengthening the skills of the workforce will also strengthen the region's food supply chain which was greatly disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, while supporting a sustainable economic recovery.

Requested Actions

- Support workforce development funding levels included in the American Jobs Plan for WIOA and fully fund the law beyond its FY 2020 authorized levels, specifically in Title 1 accounts at the U.S. Dept. of Labor (Adult Employment and Training Services, Youth Workforce Investment Activities, and Dislocated Worker Employment and Training Services).
- Secure funding for Registered Apprenticeship and training programs for non-traditional sectors such as agriculture, with eligibility to be administered by organizations that aren't necessarily unions, including nonprofits.

- Support H.R. 1603: Farm Workforce Modernization Act of 2021, to help achieve an earned legal status for Certified Agricultural Workers and improve the H-2A program.
- Support SB 486 & HR 2361: Rebuild Rural America Act to modernize infrastructure and expand investment to support local and regional food systems, sustainable agriculture production, and value-added agricultural industries. SB486 & HR 2361 will also ensure economic opportunities that create pathways to high-quality, family-sustaining jobs for all individuals in rural areas of the United States.

Brief Background

As America's Farm to Fork Capital, a skilled workforce is more important than ever to keep the region's food and ag cluster competitive globally, to keep agriculture viable, and to grow the next generation of farmers, food entrepreneurs and those businesses and organizations driving the growth of an equitable, diverse, climate-resilient, innovation-driven sector. A skilled workforce will also provide pathways to opportunity and mobility for workers in the cluster, through upskilling and reskilling. As the home of UC Davis, one of the leading agricultural and food technology universities in the world, a skilled workforce will enable farmers, food producers and enterprises across the food system to adopt new technologies and resources being generated in the region by both the University and the agri-food tech entrepreneurs being supported through global public-private partnerships and through federal investments such as EDA-funded AgStart wet lab and food lab.

Investing in this workforce is critical. The region's farmworkers, processors and retailers have been on the frontlines of supplying communities and the nation with a healthy, reliable food supply through the COVID-19 pandemic crisis; these demands continue to this day. Workforce shortages were experienced prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and have continued to grow. The average age of a skilled farmer is 57.5 years, and a skilled manufacturing worker is 55 years. An additional challenge to workforce shortages includes retention. Without farmworkers, the agricultural industry will disappear.

In addition to upskilling and reskilling existing workers and ensuring a legal and reliable workforce, there is a great need to attract new workers into the cluster, which is why investment in career awareness, workforce training and apprenticeships is so vital. Regional industry advisory cluster meetings with employers, convened by the region's community colleges and workforce boards, have validated the need for this investment across many occupations and skills, including in agri-tech and digital skills which is looming as a critically emerging gap. Expanding federal investment across WIOA programs will result in expanded job training and skills development, while providing opportunities for industry-based partnerships, identifying career pathways and apprenticeships.

Increased training and support resources, as well as addressing farm workforce challenges, will help retain our current workers, and train for the future, providing a pathway for recovery and better outcomes for workers, employers, consumers, and the regional economy.