



▼ Javier from Mexico says, "We prefer to stay in our country, but there is no work. Politicians make many promises when they want to get elected, then they forget about the poor who voted for them." © IOM 2009 - MUS0088 (Photo: Charles Porcel)

There are some 2.5 million farm workers in the U.S. If estimates that 45 per cent are unauthorized migrants are correct, that would equal almost one million irregular migrants working on U.S. farms. And yet only an average of 75,000 seasonal migrant agricultural workers travel to the United States each year under the H-2A visa programme, which has no limit on the number of visas that can be issued. The State of North Carolina has the largest number of H-2A workers with 10,000 in 2009. A visit to North Carolina's tobacco country confirms that working and living conditions are basically the same for the H-2A workers and for those who are in the country illegally and perform the same backbreaking work.

A left turn onto a dirt road in rural North Carolina leads to lush tobacco fields as far as the eye can see. With no house or other structure in site, it does not look like the camp that a group of Mexican migrant workers call home seven months of the year. But the happy and contagious Mexican Norteña music leads the way to a long one story structure divided into small rooms.

The 30 Mexican men who live in this camp are in a flurry of activity. After a grueling day under the hot August sun they are busy showering, cooking, eating, packing tomorrow's lunch, and watching a little television before getting some sleep to be able to face another day in the fields.

Two men sitting under a tree go inside and emerge a few minutes later with Cornelio Gonzalez, a 27 year-old intelligent, focused and articulate member of the group who is happy to share his story.

"I've been coming to this farm for four years. I have a wife and a three year old daughter, so I need the money," explains Cornelio. But he quickly adds: "I love my family, I miss them very much, and I'm tired; I don't think I'll come back next year. Seven months without my family is too long."

Regular or Irregular: Little Difference for North Carolina's Migrant Agricultural Workers

Niurka Pineiro reports from North Carolina



▲ Farmworker harvesting tobacco leaves in Central North Carolina. Photo by Jessamyn Bowling, 2006 Student Action with Farmworkers Into the Fields.



▲ Mary Lee Hall of Legal Aid North Carolina explains that the small containers are for berries and the bucket is for sturdier and larger fruits and vegetables. Each 5/8 bushel bucket (about 35 litres) earns the men 35 U.S. Cents. Some manage to fill 200 buckets in one day for a total of US\$70. © IOM 2009 - MUS0091 (Photo: Charles Porcel)



▲ All Mexican migrants in this camp in North Carolina say they miss their families and home cooking. They were not prepared to face a full day of work and an evening of cooking and washing. © IOM 2009 - MUS0090 (Photo: Charles Porcel)

Mary Lee Hall, Managing Attorney of the Farm Worker Unit of Legal Aid of North Carolina, says she hears this from many of the migrant workers. "There are needs and there are wants. Many times they say they don't want to come back to the U.S., and it may be true, but the reality is that they need to earn this money."

More than 150,000 migrants work in North Carolina's fields. The tobacco industry has traditionally been one of the most important industries in North Carolina and a backbone of the state's agricultural heritage. The State ranks number one in tobacco production in the country. In 2007, North Carolina tobacco farmers raised 170,000 acres with an approximate income of US\$587 million.

Thousands of those migrant men and women also work planting and harvesting fruits and vegetables, on Christmas tree farms and in nurseries.

The H2 programme, which governs all temporary foreign workers, was created by the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952. In 1986, the Immigration Reform and Control Act split the H2 programmes into H-2A for seasonal agricultural workers and H-2B for unskilled seasonal non-agricultural workers.

To participate in the H2 visa programme, migrants apply at a U.S. Consulate in their country and employers apply to the U.S. Department of Labor for accreditation.

Cornelio explains that each year he pays US\$200 for the visa and the bus trip

from his home to the city of Monterrey. The rest of the trip is reimbursed by the employer, after the individual reaches the halfway mark of his contract, as well as the return trip seven months later.

"We don't pay rent, water or electricity, which is a good thing," says Cornelio. "But we earn just US\$8.05 per hour, and the work is very hard. Some days it is so hot that the boss tells us we have to stop working, and when that happens we don't earn any more that day."

But Hall says the wage differential keeps the men coming back. What they earn in one hour in North Carolina, is equivalent to one day's work in Mexico.

"The men are on a treadmill. As the children grow, the needs grow; so they can't stop. First they have to go to primary school, then secondary school and eventually to university, so they have to keep coming back; the need is there," says Hall, who has dedicated her career to providing legal services to migrants workers.

"This type of work is entry-level, so people move out and up. But there is an endless supply of workers, so wages never improve," explains Hall, who says the economic crisis has brought many migrants who lost their jobs in cities to the job of last resort, agriculture.

According to a recent report by the Pew Hispanic Center, despite the economic downturn and high unemployment amongst Hispanic migrants, the number of Mexican migrants returning to their country has stayed level.

Javier, from Michoacan, Mexico says the bad economy drove him north from

the Florida orange groves. The living conditions at the tobacco farm where he works are borderline unacceptable. But he says in Florida they are no better and they are obliged to pay rent of US\$20-25 per week.

He is the only one willing to speak because he says he has a Green Card and all of his house mates are irregular migrants. Javier is 53 years old, and although his face is lined and cured by years of sun, he looks younger than his years and sports a perfect white smile.

Javier is an old hand at this game and says that job hunting for irregular migrants is based on the "friend network". "A fellow migrant says there is work in North Carolina and you make your way north," explains Javier. "I was in Florida working the orange harvest, that's where I start out each year, the work was slow so someone told me to come to North Carolina for the tobacco harvest."

"I've been coming to the U.S. every year for the past 18 years. I can't stop, I need money to raise my five children and give them the opportunities I did not have. As long as I can walk and work, I'll keep coming back," he says with a resolute smile.

Cornelio, who is very wise for his 27 years, says he has built his house and saved some money so he is not planning to return next year, and adds: "I have met men who have been coming to the U.S. every season for the past 10 to 15 years and have nothing to show for it. Some are worse off. In order to survive the sadness and nostalgia of family and country they spend their money on alcohol and women." **M**