
Agricultural Workers

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Significant Points

- Duties vary widely, from raising plants and livestock to inspecting agricultural products at border crossings.
- Farmworkers learn their jobs through short-term on-the-job training; agricultural inspectors and animal breeders require more work experience or a college degree.
- Most farmworkers receive relatively low pay and do strenuous work in all kinds of weather, but many enjoy the rural lifestyle.
- Job openings are expected to be numerous for some types of work.

Nature of the Work

Agricultural workers play a large role in getting food, plants, and other agricultural products to market. Working mostly on farms or ranches, but also in nurseries, slaughterhouses, and even ports of entry, these workers have numerous and diverse duties. Among their activities are planting and harvesting crops, installing irrigation, delivering animals, and inspecting our food for safety. While most agricultural workers have relatively few technical skills, some have college degrees that train them to breed animals with specific traits or to inspect food, protecting us from harmful bacteria.

More than 80 percent of agricultural workers are farmworkers and laborers. *Crop, nursery, and greenhouse farmworkers* and laborers perform numerous activities related to growing and harvesting grains, fruits, vegetables, nuts, fiber, trees, shrubs, and other crops. They plant and seed, prune, irrigate, harvest, and pack and load crops for shipment. Farmworkers also apply pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers to crops and repair fences and some farm equipment. Nursery and greenhouse workers prepare land or greenhouse beds for growing horticultural products, such as trees, plants, flowers, and sod. Their duties include planting, watering, pruning, weeding, and spraying the plants. They may cut, roll, and stack sod; stake trees; tie, wrap, and pack plants to fill orders; and dig up or move field-grown and containerized shrubs and trees.

Farm and ranch animal farmworkers care for live farm, ranch, or water animals that may include cattle, sheep, swine, goats, horses, poultry, finfish, shellfish, and bees. The animals are usually raised to supply meat, fur, skins, feathers, eggs, milk, or honey. Duties may include feeding, watering, herding, grazing, castrating, branding, debeaking, weighing, catching, and loading animals. On dairy farms, farmworkers operate milking machines; they also may maintain records on animals, examine animals to detect diseases and injuries, assist in delivering animals at their birth, and administer medications, vaccinations, or insecticides. Many workers clean and maintain animal housing areas every day.

Other agricultural workers known as *agricultural equipment operators* use a variety of farm equipment to plow, sow seeds, and maintain and harvest crops. Equipment may include tractors, fertilizer spreaders, haybines, raking equipment, balers, combines, threshers, and trucks. These workers also operate machines, such as conveyor belts, loading machines, separators, cleaners, and dryers, used in moving and treating crops after their harvest. As part of the job, workers may make adjustments and minor repairs to equipment.

Agricultural inspectors, another type of agricultural worker, are employed by Federal and State governments to ensure compliance with laws and regulations governing the health, safety, and quality of agricultural commodities. Inspectors also make sure that the facilities and equipment used in processing the commodities meet legal standards. Meat safety is a prime responsibility. Inspectors work to ensure that meat is free of harmful ingredients or bacteria. In meat-processing facilities, inspectors may collect samples of meat suspected to be diseased or contaminated and send them to a laboratory for identification and analysis. They also may inspect livestock to help determine the effectiveness of medication and feeding programs. Some inspectors are stationed at export and import sites to weigh and inspect agricultural shipments leaving and entering the country to ensure the quality and quantity of the shipments. A few work at logging sites, making sure that safety regulations are enforced.

Graders and sorters of agricultural products examine agricultural commodities being prepared for market, classifying them according to quality or size: they grade, sort, or classify unprocessed food and other agricultural products by size, weight, color, or condition and discard inferior or defective products. For example, graders sort eggs by color and size and also examine the fat content; others examine the marbling of beef, classifying the meat as “Prime,” “Choice,” or a lower grade, as appropriate. The grade assigned determines the meat’s price.

Animal breeders select and breed animals using their knowledge of genetics and animal science to produce offspring with desired traits and characteristics, such as chickens that lay more eggs, pigs that produce leaner meat, and sheep with more desirable wool. Some animal breeders also breed and raise cats, dogs, and other household pets. Larger and more expensive animals, such as horses and cattle, are usually bred through artificial insemination, which requires the taking of semen from the male and then inseminating the female. This process ensures better results than conventional mating and also enables one prized male to sire many more offspring. To know which animals to breed and when, animal breeders keep detailed records, including the health of the animals, their size and weight, and the amount and quality of the product produced by them. They also keep track of the traits of the offspring. Some animal breeders work as consultants for a number of farmers, but others breed and raise their own animals for sale or future breeding. For those who raise animals, tasks might include fixing and cleaning animal shelters, feeding and watering the animals, and overseeing animals’ health. Some breeders supervise others who perform these tasks. Animal breeders also read journals and newsletters to learn the latest information on breeding and veterinary practices.

Work environment. Working conditions for agricultural workers vary widely. Much of the work of farmworkers and laborers on farms and ranches is physically strenuous and takes place outdoors in all kinds of weather. Harvesting fruits and vegetables, for example, may require much bending, stooping, and lifting. Work-

ers may have limited access to sanitation facilities while working in the field and drinking water may also be limited. Nevertheless, some agricultural workers enjoy the variety of their work, the rural setting, the satisfaction of working the land, and raising animals.

Farm work does not lend itself to a regular 40-hour work-week. Work cannot be delayed when crops must be planted or harvested or when animals must be sheltered and fed. Long hours and weekend work is common in these jobs. For example, farmworkers and agricultural equipment operators may work 6- or 7 days a week during planting and harvesting seasons. Some graders and sorters may work evenings or weekends because of the perishable nature of the products they inspect. Agricultural inspectors may also work long and irregular schedules.

Many agricultural worker jobs are seasonal in nature, so some workers also do other jobs during slow seasons. Migrant farmworkers, who move from location to location as crops ripen, live an unsettled lifestyle, which can be stressful. Work also is seasonal for farmworkers in nurseries; spring and summer are the busiest times of the year. Greenhouse workers enjoy relatively comfortable working conditions while tending to plants indoors. However, during the busy seasons, when landscape contractors need plants, work schedules may be more demanding, requiring weekend work. Moreover, the transition from warm weather to cold weather means that nursery workers might have to work overtime with little notice given in order to move plants indoors to protect them from a frost. Farmworkers who work with animals usually have a more regular schedule; their work is steadier and year round, but they sometimes must come to work on short notice to help handle emergencies.

Farmworkers risk exposure to pesticides and other hazardous chemicals sprayed on crops or plants. However, exposure can be minimal if safety procedures are followed. Those who work on mechanized farms must take precautions to avoid injury when working with tools and heavy equipment. Those who work directly with animals risk being bitten or kicked.

Federal meat inspectors may work in highly mechanized plants or with poultry or livestock in confined areas with extremely cold temperatures and slippery floors. Inspectors' jobs often require working with sharp knives, moderate lifting, and walking or standing for long periods. Inspectors may find themselves in adversarial roles when the organization or individual being inspected objects to the inspection or its potential consequences. Some inspectors travel frequently to visit farms and processing facilities. Others work at ports, inspecting cargo on the docks or on boats.

Graders and sorters may work with similar products for an entire shift, or they may be assigned a variety of items. They may be on their feet all day and may have to lift heavy objects, but others may sit during most of their shift and do little strenuous work. Some graders work in clean, air-conditioned environments, suitable for carrying out controlled tests.

Animal breeders spend most of their time outdoors around animals but can also work in offices or laboratories. Breeders who consult may travel from farm to farm. If they need to sell offspring, breeders may travel to attend shows and meet potential buyers. While tending to the animals, breeders may be bitten or kicked.



Agricultural workers tend to flowers or crops in nurseries and greenhouses.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

The majority of agricultural workers learn their skills on the job in less than a month. Some occupations, however, require more work experience or formal education.

Education and training. Most farmworkers learn their jobs quickly as they work; many do not have a high school diploma. People without a high school diploma are particularly common in the crop production sector, which is more labor-intensive and employs more migrant farmworkers. Other agricultural workers require a month to a year of training on the job and, maybe, coursework in related subjects. For graders and sorters, training requirements vary on the basis of their responsibilities. For those who perform tests on agricultural products, a high school diploma is preferred and may be required. Simple jobs requiring mostly visual inspection might be filled by those without a high school diploma.

The education and training requirements for animal breeders vary with the type of breeding they do. For those who breed livestock and other large or expensive animals, a bachelor's or graduate degree in animal science is recommended. Courses include genetics, animal breeding, and animal physiology. For those with experience raising animals or who are breeding their own animals, a bachelor's degree often is not needed, but an associate degree or other training in animal breeding is recommended.

Agricultural inspector jobs require relevant work experience or some college coursework in biology, agricultural science, or a related subject. Inspectors also must be trained in the applicable laws and regulations governing inspection before they can start their jobs.

Other qualifications. Experience working on a farm or around animals is helpful but not necessary to qualify for many jobs. For those who operate equipment on the road or drive a truck as part their job, a driver's license or commercial driver's license is required.

Nursery workers who deal directly with customers must be friendly and tactful. Employers also look for responsible, self-motivated individuals because nursery workers sometimes work with little supervision. People who want to become agricultural inspectors should be responsible, able to communicate well, and like detailed work.

Advancement. Farmworkers who work hard and quickly, have good communication skills, and take an interest in the business may advance to crew leader or other supervisory positions. The ability to speak both English and Spanish is quite helpful in supervisory work as well.

Some agricultural workers aspire to become farm, ranch, or other agricultural managers, or own farms or ranches themselves. (Farmers, ranchers, and agricultural managers are discussed elsewhere in the *Handbook*.) In addition, their knowledge of raising and harvesting produce may provide an excellent background for becoming purchasing agents and buyers of farm products. Knowledge of working a farm as a business can also help agricultural workers become farm and home management advisors. Those who earn a college degree in agricultural science could become agricultural and food scientists.

Federal Government inspectors whose job performance is satisfactory advance through a career ladder to a specified level. Positions above this level are usually supervisory, and advancement to them is competitive and based on agency needs and individual merit. Advancement opportunities in State and local governments and in the private sector often are similar to those in the Federal Government.

Employment

Agricultural workers held about 859,000 jobs in 2006. More than 68 percent of all agricultural workers worked for crop and livestock producers, while about 5 percent worked for agricultural service providers, mostly farm labor contractors. Agri-

cultural inspectors are employed mainly by Federal, State, and local governments.

By far, the State with the largest employment of farmworkers is California, followed by Oregon and Washington. Though these States produce a multitude of agricultural products, they are particularly known for raising grapes, potatoes, tomatoes, lettuce, apples, citrus, and nursery and greenhouse products.

Job Outlook

Job opportunities for agricultural workers occupations should be abundant because large numbers of workers leave these jobs due to their low wages and physical demands. Overall employment of agricultural workers is projected to undergo little or no change over the 2006-16 decade, reflecting in large part the outlook for farmworkers in crops, nurseries, and greenhouses, who make up the large majority of all agricultural workers.

Employment change. Overall employment of agricultural workers is expected to decline about 2 percent, which is considered little or no change. Employment of farmworkers who work in crops, nurseries, or greenhouses and those who work with farm and ranch animals are projected to decline moderately, about 3 percent. Fewer farmworkers will be needed overall because of continued consolidation of farms and technological advancements in farm equipment that make existing farmworkers more efficient. Farmworkers will increasingly work for farm labor contractors rather than being hired directly by a farm. The agriculture industry also is expected to face increased competition from foreign countries and rising imports, particularly from Central America and China because of free trade agreements with those regions. Nursery and greenhouse workers should experience some job growth in this period, reflecting the increasing demand for landscaping plants.

Employment of agricultural inspectors is expected show little or no change. Governments at all levels are not expected to hire significant numbers of new inspectors, and instead to leave more of the routine inspections to businesses. Little or no change in employment is also expected for graders and sorters. Employment of agricultural equipment operators is expected to decline moderately, reflecting the agriculture industry's continuing ability to produce more with fewer workers overall. Consolidation is resulting in fewer small farmers and greater need to hire equipment operators, but on a temporary basis. Animal breeders will grow more slowly than average, around 4 percent over the 2006-16 period, as large commercial farmers continue to try

Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2006	Projected employment, 2016	Change, 2006-16	
				Number	Percent
Agricultural workers	45-2000	859,000	838,000	-21,000	-2
Agricultural inspectors.....	45-2011	16,000	16,000	-200	-1
Animal breeders.....	45-2021	11,000	11,000	500	4
Graders and sorters, agricultural products	45-2041	42,000	41,000	-800	-2
Miscellaneous agricultural workers	45-2090	790,000	769,000	-20,000	-3
Agricultural equipment operators	45-2091	59,000	56,000	-3,000	-5
Farmworkers and laborers, crop, nursery, and greenhouse.....	45-2092	603,000	583,000	-20,000	-3
Farmworkers, farm and ranch animals.....	45-2093	107,000	110,000	2,900	3
Agricultural workers, all other.....	45-2099	20,000	20,000	0	0

NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

to improve their animals. However, because the occupation is so small, few new jobs are expected.

Job prospects. Job openings should be plentiful because of relatively large numbers of workers who leave these jobs for other occupations. This is especially true for jobs as agricultural inspectors, graders and sorters, agricultural equipment operators, and crop, greenhouse, and nursery farmworkers. Job prospects will not be as good for animal breeders and ranch and animal farmworkers because fewer workers leave these jobs. Those who work with animals tend to have a more settled lifestyle, as the work does not require them to follow crops for harvest.

Earnings

Agricultural workers had the following median hourly earnings in May 2006:

Agricultural inspectors.....	\$18.32
Animal breeders.....	13.02
Agricultural equipment operators.....	9.72
Farmworkers, farm and ranch animals.....	9.17
Graders and sorters, agricultural products.....	8.27
Farmworkers and laborers, crop, nursery, and greenhouse.....	7.95

Farmworkers in crop production often are paid piece rates, with earnings based on how much they do instead of how many hours they work. Farmworkers tend to receive fewer benefits

than those in many other occupations. Some employers supply seasonal workers with room and board. Agricultural inspectors employed by State and Federal Governments tend to have very good benefits.

Related Occupations

The duties of farmworkers who perform outdoor labor are similar to the duties of grounds maintenance workers; fishers and operators of fishing vessels; and forest, conservation, and logging workers. Farmworkers who work with farm and ranch animals perform tasks similar to those of animal care and service workers. Animal breeders may perform some work similar to those of veterinary technologists or veterinarians.

Sources of Additional Information

Information on agricultural worker jobs is available from:

- ▶ National FFA Organization, The National FFA Center, Attention: Career Information Requests, P.O. Box 68690, Indianapolis, IN 46268-0960. Internet: <http://www.ffa.org>

Information on obtaining positions as an agricultural inspector with the Federal Government is available from the Office of Personnel Management through USAJOBS, the Federal Government's official employment information system. This resource for locating and applying for job opportunities can be accessed through the Internet at <http://www.usajobs.opm.gov> or through an interactive voice response telephone system at (703) 724-1850 or TDD (978) 461-8404. These numbers are not toll free, and charges may result.