

PERSPECTIVES

By Peggy Stuart

Many Migrant Workers Face Bleak Prospects

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In July 1990, then-Secretary of Labor Elizabeth Dole submitted her department's Farm Labor Strategy proposal to the White House. The proposal sought to coordinate and improve services and enforcement, eliminate duplication of bureaucracy, and reconcile conflicting regulations. In the report, Dole writes, "This affords an opportunity to take steps which will serve to stabilize agricultural labor markets—to the benefit of both employers and farm workers...." She intended to work with both agricultural employer groups and farm worker advocates, and would have focused on new approaches. All of this, she wrote, could be accomplished without any additional funding. President George Bush, under pressure from farm employers, blocked the proposal. Partly because of the proposal's rejection, Dole resigned her post three months later. As a result of the national election in November, we may see renewed interest in the proposal.

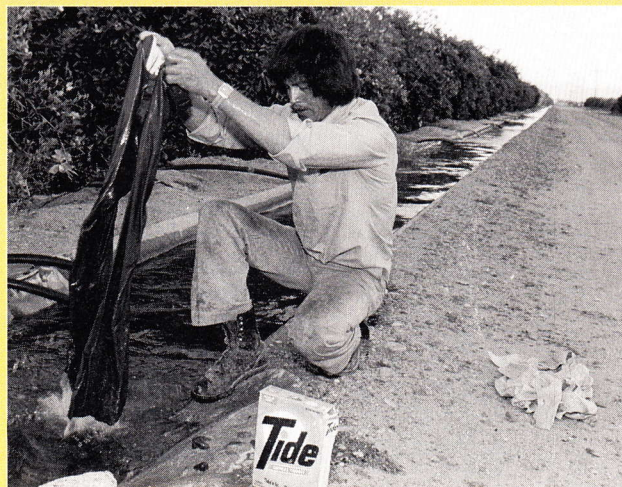
- ▶ Percentage of migrant farm workers in the U.S. who are citizens of Mexico: 57.
- ▶ Percentage of migrant farm workers in the U.S. who are not Hispanic: 26.
- ▶ Percentage of migrant farm workers who work in vegetable, fruit, sugar cane and grain field crops: 52.
- ▶ Percentage of migrant farm workers who work for tobacco growers: 3.5.

- ▶ Amount the average farm worker earned in 1985: \$3,247.
- ▶ Unpaid wages owed to migrant workers revealed between June 22 and July 20, 1990 by the 1990 East Coast Farm Labor Strike Force: \$43,194.
- ▶ Largest farm labor penalty imposed in 1990: \$250,000.
- ▶ Percentage of migrant farm workers who are functionally illiterate: 15.
- ▶ The rate of school enrollment for farm worker children is lower than for any other group in the U.S.
- ▶ Percent of migrant farm worker children who don't finish high school: 86.
- ▶ Lag in grade level of migrant farm worker children behind other children: 6 to 18 months.
- ▶ Percent of children in the U.S. who don't finish high school: 25.
- ▶ Percentage of children ages five to 14 injured in agricultural accidents: 35.
- ▶ Number of states that have no labor provisions specifically aimed at protecting farm worker children: 16.

- ▶ Age at which farm worker children lose federal child labor law protection: 12.
- ▶ The rate of parasitic disease among the children of migrant workers working in the U.S. is higher than it is for children in Guatemala.
- ▶ The miscarriage rate for farm workers is seven times the national average.
- ▶ Migrant workers are three times more likely than the general U.S. population to be exposed to toxic chemicals.
- ▶ Farm workers in the U.S. have five times more cases of skin rash than other workers.

I have personally witnessed the deplorable living and working conditions of some migrant farm workers. I was appalled and moved. Moreover, it is my duty as Secretary of Labor to foster and protect the well-being of all workers.

—Elizabeth Dole, in her Farm Labor Strategy proposal of July 24, 1990, which was never implemented.



A migrant worker washes his clothes in pesticide-laced drainage water. Such practices are common for migrants.

- ▶ More than 44% of the farm worker households in the U.S. have at least one disabled family member.
- ▶ Number of states that exempt agricultural workers from workers' compensation coverage: 19.
- ▶ Rate of job-related deaths in agriculture in 1985, per 100,000: 49.
- ▶ OSHA field sanitation standards required of growers that employ 11 field workers or more at any one time during a 12-month period: drinking water, toilets and hand-washing facilities.
- ▶ Average life expectancy of migrant agricultural workers in the U.S. : 50. ■

—Sources available upon request.