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# The Availability Of Farm Workers In The 1999 Central Valley Raisin & Grape Harvests

**A SURVEY OF 847 FARM WORKERS  
CONCERNING EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES IN  
FRESNO, MADERA, KERN AND TULARE COUNTIES  
BETWEEN LATE AUGUST AND EARLY OCTOBER 1999**

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# **I. Introduction & Overview**

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Throughout 1998 and 1999, Fresno area raisin and grape growers have continued to claim that their harvests were being adversely affected by serious farm labor shortages that threaten them now and in the future.

To assess the accuracy of these allegations, CRLAF surveyed 350 farm workers in the 4-county Fresno region in 1998 and found that 29% were available for work during the period of claimed labor shortages, and that two-thirds of these workers knew of specific other individuals who were also available for work.<sup>1</sup>

In 1999, CRLAF decided to significantly expand its investigation into the availability of farm workers in two major ways. First, we planned to greatly increase both the number of farm workers interviewed and the number of survey sites; and second, we structured the survey so that extensive numbers of interviews would be conducted throughout the five to six week harvest period in the entire four county Fresno region.

Between the end of August 1999, and the first week of October 1999, CRLAF interviewed 847 farm workers in more than 150 locations in nearly four dozen Central Valley communities. This report provides specific details of the results of those interviews, but, in general, shows 1) that very high underemployment and unemployment of farm workers were occurring even at the height of the harvests, and 2) that the employers' media-based recruitment efforts aimed at farm workers in this region were deeply flawed (and probably completely ineffective).

## **A. Methodology**

**Survey Instrument.** The survey questionnaire was developed by CRLAF, and pretested during the 2nd week of August 1999. Final refinements were made to the questionnaire before training of interviewers began. **Training of Interviewers.** Bilingual/bicultural members of the farm worker community with a knowledge of the four county grape and raisin harvest were hired and trained during the 3rd week of August 1999. **Survey Interview Sites.** Interviewers were urged to seek out active farm workers at labor camps, pick-up sites, work locations, and other places where farm workers gather. **Survey Interviews.** While a few

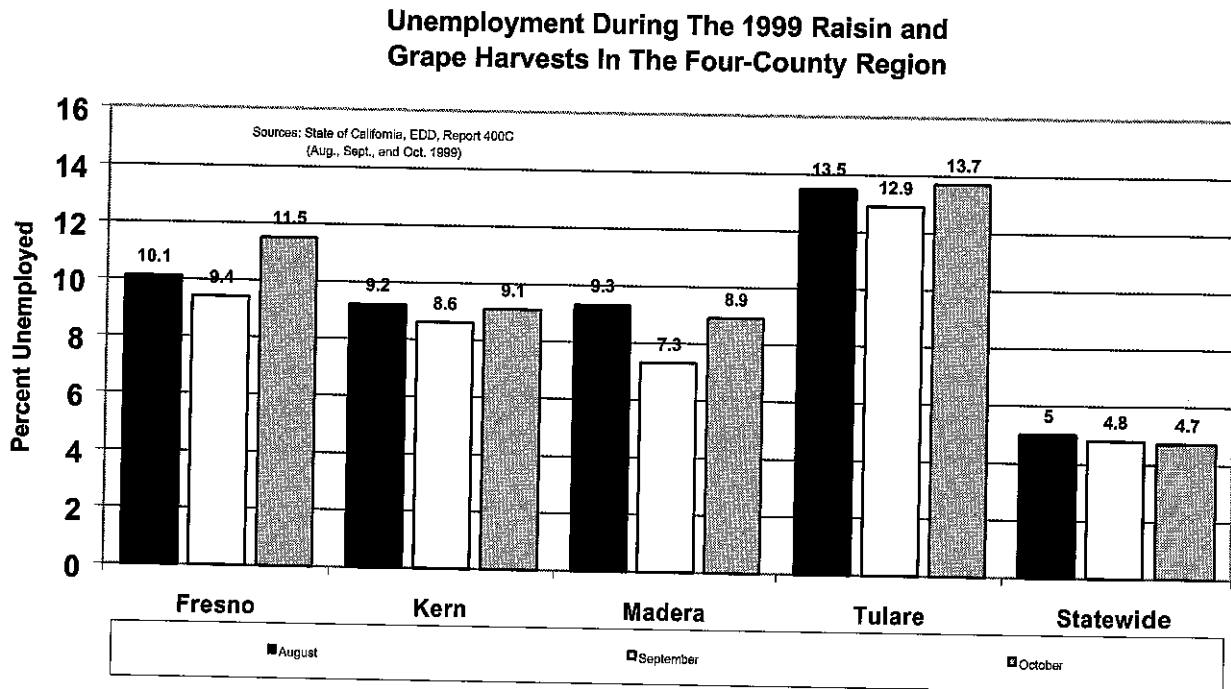
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<sup>1</sup> M. Schacht, I. Aizpuru, A. Juarez, K. Rowe, and A. Santiago, "The 1998 Central Valley Raisin Harvest: A Case Study of the Availability of Farm Workers During the Alleged Labor Shortage in the Four County Fresno Area," CRLA Foundation (April 1999), Sacramento, California. A copy of this report is available on the Web at <http://www.crlaf.org/raisin98.htm>.

### III. Survey Results

#### A. Availability of Farm Workers

In August, September and October 1999, Fresno and surrounding counties continued to experience the same high levels of unemployment that have plagued the Central Valley for at least two decades. Indeed, as the chart below demonstrates, the four counties' unemployment rates during the grape and raisin harvests were often more than *twice* the state average, and during the height of the harvest (in September) more than 87,000 unemployed individuals were looking for work there.



It is in the context of this persistent, disproportionately high unemployment in the region that the survey results regarding farm worker availability should be viewed. These data are a persuasive reminder that no genuine labor shortage exists now (or is likely to exist in these counties for many years to come).

In the 5 charts below, we display the survey results regarding farm workers' availability --i.e., those workers who were working less than 40 hours in a particular week included in the survey, and who were also available to work at least 20 hours that week.

## **A. Methodology, cont.**

of the survey questions related to overall farm labor conditions, the main focus of each farm worker interview was in three specific areas:

- 1. For each week (between 8/29/99 and 10/2/99), was he/she working less than full time (i.e., less than 40 hours per week), and was he/she available to work at least 20 hours a week in either the grape or raisin harvests?**
- 2. Did he/she know of other specific individual workers who were working less than full-time during this period, and who were also known to be available for work of at least 20 hours per week?**
- 3. Did he/she read, hear on the radio, or see on television any job advertisements, in English, Spanish or Hmong, for work in these harvests during this time period that contained all of the following information:**
  - i. The name of the grower/labor contractor who was offering the job, along with the job location;**
  - ii. The date(s) of employment;**
  - iii. The wage rate(s) to be paid; and**
  - iv. A telephone contact number.**

## **B. Survey Site Information**

Surveyors were instructed to interview no more than five farm-workers at random at each site. They were advised not to visit state or federal government offices (e.g., unemployment, welfare, etc.), but instead to concentrate on selecting locations which they knew to have high numbers of active farm workers seeking work from growers, labor contractors, raiteros or mayordomos. Interviews were often conducted in early mornings, on weekends, and at job sites after harvest work terminated. No individual was interviewed more than once, even though surveyors sometimes returned to the same site during a different week.

Interviews were conducted at the following 43 cities and towns (in Fresno, Tulare, Kern and Madera counties): Farmersville, Easton, Selma, Strathmore, Caruthers, Palmview, Dinuba, Sultana, La Vina, Orange Cove, Delano, Cutler, Yetttem, Reedley, Misizuki, Orosi, Traver, Ivanhoe, Portersville, Exeter, Rolinda, Biola, Kerman, Fowler, Springfield, Chowchilla, Visalia, Huron, Five Points, Fresno, Mendota, Raisin City, Riverdale, Easton, Firebaugh, Sanger, Del Rey, Parlier, Reedley, Madera, Tranquility, Coalinga, and San Joaquin.

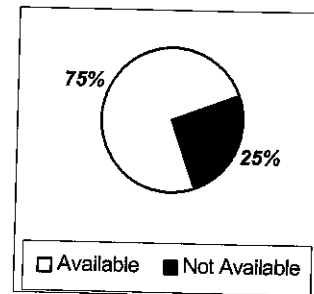
## A. Availability of Farm Workers, *cont.*

### *How the "Availability" Question was Presented to Farm Workers*

Surveyors presented each farm worker with a calendar that showed all of the days in each of the five weeks covered in the survey. Workers were asked (for the particular week they were interviewed) whether they were "available" as defined. Then, they were asked the same questions for each prior week (if any).

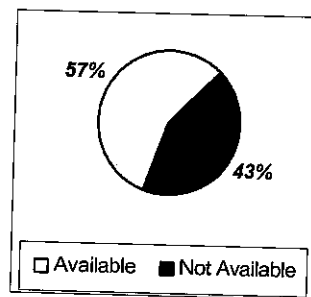
Surveyors then recorded the responses for each week on the survey instrument. Later, we tabulated the number of responses, by week; that number is shown below each week's chart.

#### **WEEK OF 8/29 - 9/4**



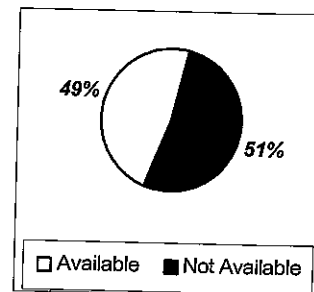
*Number of farm worker responses for this week: 843*

#### **WEEK OF 9/5 - 9/11**



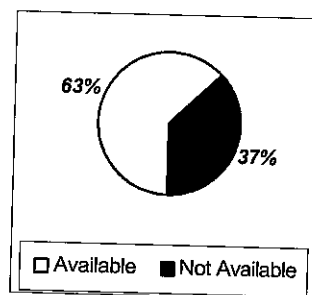
*Number of farm worker responses for this week: 703*

#### **WEEK OF 9/12 - 9/18**



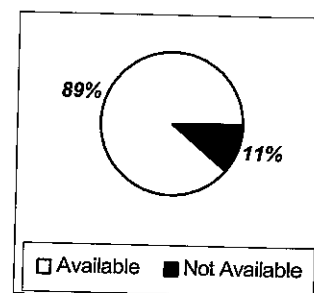
*Number of farm worker responses for this week: 590*

#### **WEEK OF 9/19 - 9/25**



*Number of farm worker responses for this week: 388*

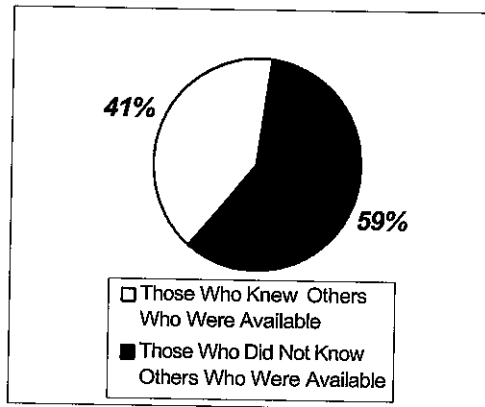
#### **WEEK OF 9/26 - 10/2**



*Number of farm worker responses for this week: 262*

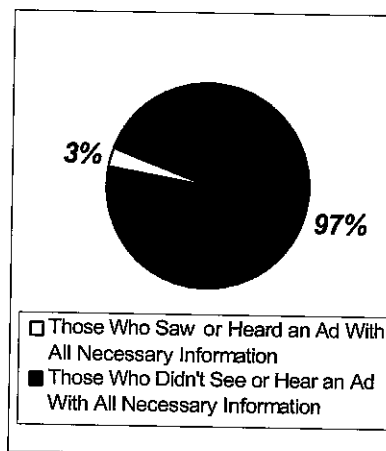
## A. Availability of Farm Workers, *cont.*

Farm worker respondents were also asked whether they could specifically identify other individual workers whom they positively knew to be available (--i.e, for at least 20 hours work per week) for harvest week in grapes or raisins. These results (below), and those on the preceding page, clearly demonstrate that there were very significant numbers of available farm workers in the areas of purported need.



## B. Employer Recruitment Efforts

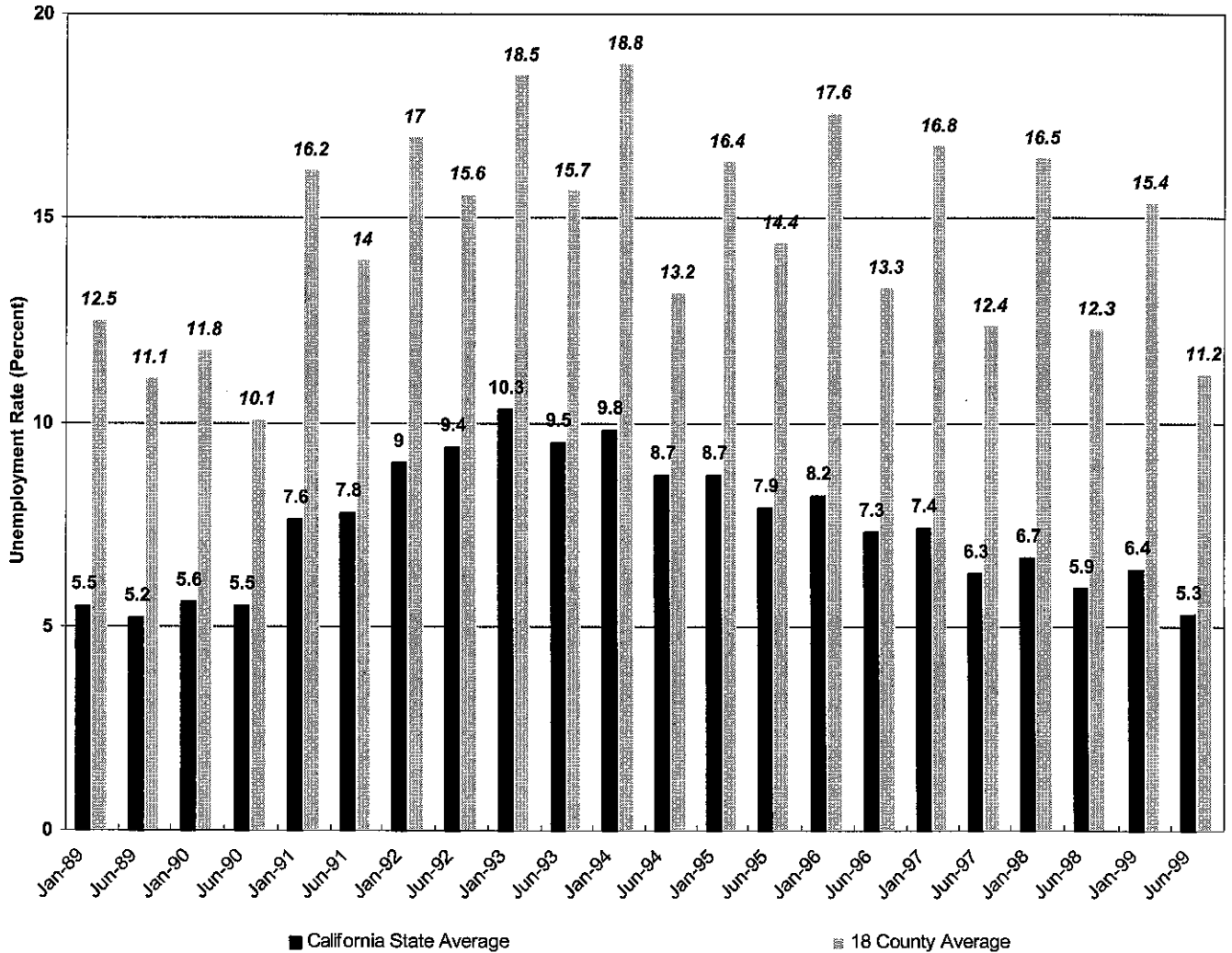
Why employers aren't "finding" available workers was explored in a specific question about their media-based recruitment efforts. Farm workers were asked whether they read, saw (on television or billboards) or heard (on the radio) any advertisements in English, Spanish or Hmong, that contained all of the following information: 1) the name of the grower/labor contractor who was offering the job, along with the job location; 2) the date(s) of employment; 3) the wage rate(s) to be paid; and 4) a telephone contact number. The results are below.



## IV. Appendix

### A. Unemployment Rates in Key Agricultural Counties

#### AVERAGE UNEMPLOYMENT RATES 1989 - 1999: COMPARISON OF CALIFORNIA AND 18 AGRICULTURAL COUNTIES, PEAK AND OFF-PEAK HARVEST MONTHS\*



Source: State of California, Employment Development Department, Report 400C, 1989 to 1999

\* NOTE: The 18 counties reflected in this chart's data include the four county Fresno region, as well as other key crop production counties throughout the state. Because California's agricultural off-peak and peak employment periods vary considerably (both by region and by the more than 200 crops grown here), we have chosen January and June, respectively, to serve as the off-peak and peak employment months for purposes of comparing the 18 counties' average unemployment rates with the average statewide rate. (For example, see EDD's Report 882-A, which states that California's peak agricultural months are: for the North Coast counties: September; for the Sacramento Valley counties: October; for the Central Valley counties: September; for the Central Coast counties: July; for the South Coast counties: May; and for the Desert counties: June.)



## B. U.S. Government Labor Surplus Area Designations

Table III.2: Food Stamp Waiver and Labor Surplus Area Designations for 20 Counties With Significant Production in Fruits, Tree Nuts, and Vegetables, 1997

County <sup>a</sup>	Scope of food stamp eligibility waiver <sup>b</sup>	Reason for USDA waiver <sup>c</sup>	Scope of labor surplus area designation, <sup>d</sup> fiscal year 1997
Fresno County, Calif.		Over 10 percent unemployment rate	Entire county
Imperial, County, Calif.	Entire county	Over 10 percent unemployment rate	Entire county
Kern, Calif.	Entire county	Over 10 percent unemployment rate	Entire county
Madera County, Calif.	Entire county	Over 10 percent unemployment rate	Entire county
Merced County, Calif.	Entire county	Over 10 percent unemployment rate	Entire county
Monterey County, Calif.	Entire county	Over 10 percent unemployment rate	Excludes cities of Monterey and Salinas
Riverside County, Calif.	Entire county	Insufficient jobs	Excludes city of Palm Desert
San Diego County, Calif.	Cities of Chula Vista, El Cajon, Imperial Beach, Lemon Grove, National City, Oceanside, and Vista	Insufficient jobs	Not designated as labor surplus area
San Joaquin County, Calif.	Entire county	Over 10 percent unemployment rate	Entire county
Santa Barbara County, Calif.	Lompoc City, Santa Maria	Insufficient jobs	Not designated as labor surplus area
Stanislaus County, Calif.	Entire county	Over 10 percent unemployment rate	Entire county
Tulare County, Calif.	Entire county	Over 10 percent unemployment rate	Entire county
Ventura County, Calif.	Entire county	Insufficient jobs	Excludes cities of Camarillo, Moorpark, Simi Valley, Thousand Oaks, and Ventura
Collier County, Fla.	Entire county	Insufficient jobs	Entire county

(continued)

GAO/HEHS-98-20 H-2A Guestworker Program

## B. U.S. Government Labor Surplus Area Designations, *cont.*

County <sup>a</sup>	Scope of food stamp eligibility waiver <sup>b</sup>	Reason for USDA waiver <sup>c</sup>	Scope of labor surplus area designation, <sup>d</sup> fiscal year 1997
		Insufficient jobs	Excludes entire county except for cities of North Miami, Hialeah, Homestead, Miami Beach, and Miami
Hendry County, Fla.	Entire county	Over 10 percent unemployment rate	Entire county
Palm Beach County, Fla.	Entire county	Insufficient jobs	Excludes cities of Boca Raton, Jupiter, and Palm Beach Gardens
St. Lucie County, Fla.	Entire county	Over 10 percent unemployment rate	Entire county
Yuma County, Ariz.	Entire county	Over 10 percent unemployment rate	Entire county
Yakima County, Wash.	Entire county	Over 10 percent unemployment rate	Entire county

<sup>a</sup>These 20 counties accounted for about half of the total national value of production in fruits, tree nuts, and vegetables in 1992, the latest year for which data were available.

<sup>b</sup>Section 6(o) of the Food Stamp Act, as amended by section 824 of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, provides that, among other criteria, a person is ineligible for the program if he or she previously received benefits but did not work at least 20 hours per week for at least a 3-month period. However, the provisions also say that, on the request of a state agency, the Secretary of Agriculture may waive these provisions for specified persons in the state. USDA issued most of the waivers to the designated counties during early 1997.

<sup>c</sup>The Secretary of Agriculture may waive current food stamp eligibility provisions if he determines that the area in which the persons reside has an unemployment rate of over 10 percent or has an insufficient number of jobs to provide employment for program participants. Among other evidence, designation of an area by Labor as a labor surplus area can be considered by the Secretary that an insufficient number of jobs are available.

<sup>d</sup>Labor classifies a civil jurisdiction as a labor surplus area when that jurisdiction's average unemployment rate is at least 20 percent above the average national unemployment rates during the previous 2 calendar years. During periods of high unemployment, an area can be classified as a labor surplus area if it has unemployment rates of 10 percent or more during the previous 2 calendar years. Labor may also designate areas if an area had unemployment rates of at least 7.1 percent for each of the 3 most recent months or projected unemployment of at least 7.1 percent for each of the next 12 months or has documentation that this has already occurred. Labor designates labor surplus areas on a fiscal-year basis. Designated labor surplus areas are eligible for preference in bidding on federal procurement contracts.

Sources: USDA and Department of Labor.