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AFBF Leader Warns Of Labor Shortage; Urges Government Ease Foreign Worker Rules

The prospect of the shortest supply of seasonal farm labor in many years is the most difficult problem facing fruit and vegetable growers, Charles B. Shuman, president of the nation's largest farm organization, the American Farm Bureau Federation, said recently.

"With the unemployment rate down to 3.7 percent, there simply is not enough slack in the available labor force to meet the seasonal farm labor demand. We, as farmers, are happy about the new low in the unemployment rate, but at the same time we must face the fact that this reduces the availability of workers to harvest fruit and vegetable crops," Shuman said.

Shuman made the state-

ment in announcing the appointment of a special National Farm Labor Committee to study a problem which, he said, promises to be most serious for both consumers and farmers.

Shuman declared that Secretary Wirtz in the past has granted only minimum and last-minute relief for farmers caught in emergency labor shortage situations.

"As a general rule," Shuman said, "the actions of the Secretary has been too little and too late. Heavy crop losses were the result in 1965. Agriculture, particularly the fruit and vegetable industry with its many complexities and risk-taking, needs assurance that emergency situations will be met with prompt and adequate action."

"In 1965, substantial losses were experienced by producers of strawberries, tomatoes, and asparagus in California and cucumbers in Michigan. This pattern will become much more serious if the Administration does not develop a program upon which farmers and others involved can rely."

Shuman said the present farm work force of 800,000 will have to be tripled by June to 2.4 million workers to meet demand.

The Farm Bureau president said farmers are mechanizing rapidly in the face of the labor shortage, but that mechanization still is some distance off for some crops. As an example of heightened mechanization, he said it is expected that 80 percent of the California canning tomato crop will be picked by machines this year, as against 29 percent mechanically harvested last year.

"The fact is," he concluded, "many fruit and vegetable farmers will be desperate for help unless the Administration indicates more clearly than they have yet done that the employment of foreign workers will be permitted to meet crucial farm labor emergencies."

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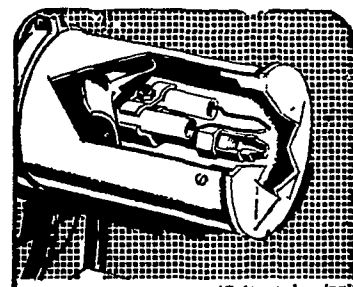
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