

Pushed by Rising Labor Costs

Mechanization Seen for Vegetables

Spurred by sharply rising labor costs, increasing shares of U.S. vegetable crops are being mechanized.

The future is not so bright for fruits, however, since mechanization for fruits and nuts is expected to lag.

As overall vegetable and fruit production expands sharply, total labor needs are expected to remain stable, despite increased mechanization.

These trends of rising labor costs and increased mechanization can be expected to continue through 1975, according to the USDA's Statistical Reporting Service.

In the past two decades both hand labor and machinery have gone up in price. But labor's cost has climbed about 50 per cent faster since 1950.

If this sort of price relationship persists to 1975, harvesting machinery too expensive in terms of today's labor costs may well become relatively cheap tomorrow.

By 1975, three-fourths of the U.S. vegetable crop probably will be machine harvested. That compares with a bit more than half today.

Practically all the Nation's snap bean crop, all the peas, carrots, and potatoes will be plucked mechanically, along with much of the tomato, lettuce, cucumber, and onion crops.

In fact, only fresh tomato harvesting will be less than half-way mechanized by 1975.

As for fruits and nuts, the two per cent now being machine picked should be up to 17 per cent in 1975. There'll be further mechanization in that cherry production — which is already about 50 per cent complete. And there should be big gains too in sweet cherries, wine grapes, and cling peaches.

The machines' coming isn't going to mean a big cutback in fruit and vegetable labor needs, however.

The reason: A big gain in production is likely by 1975 — and most of that gain will be in fruits and nuts where mechanization will still be slight.

Farmers five years hence probably will be harvesting about a fourth more fruits and nuts than they do nowadays. And while they won't need as

much harvest labor — machines will have cut their needs about 23 per cent per acre — some preharvest chores will still be hand done and time consuming. Thus, total labor going into an acre of fruits and vegetables will be down only about 19 per cent.

With crop production slated to go up a fourth and output per man-hour to rise only about a fifth, the total amount of labor going into fruits and nuts in 1975 will probably be close to what it is today.

Harvesting may take eight per cent fewer man-hours—229 million compared with 249 million today. However, total labor for all fruits and nuts, including all preharvest work, could drop only three per cent by 1975—from 418 million to 414 million hours.

Only cherries and grapes will need a lot less labor than now—though there may be some slight cutbacks in strawberries and pecans, too.

But citrus crops will call for more work in the years ahead. Output of oranges, for example, is slated to rise 41 per cent. But there'll be only a moderate improvement in output per man-hour.

Thus, tomorrow's larger crop will take 24 per cent more man-hours to produce. And it'll be just about the same story for other citrus crops, too.

Vegetables, in contrast, will

be easier to harvest. In the next five years, mechanization will have cut the amount of harvest labor per acre almost in half. And even though preharvest work won't be as completely mechanized, total labor going into an acre of vegetables will be about a third less than today.

With an expected 11 per cent increase in the production of vegetables over the next couple of years, man-hours for harvest will fall off 40 per cent—from 163 million to 98 million. And total labor needs will go from 265 million hours to 194 million hours, about a 27 per cent decline.

Unskilled and migrant job holders will most likely be jolted by the unequal changes in fruit and vegetable labor requirements.

Some workers — those who work on snap beans, for example — are going to find themselves out of jobs as the pace of mechanization picks up in the next five years. Citrus producers, though, will need more help, even with more machine power.

Eventually, however, adoption of the new technology is going to mean a smaller, more stable, better paid, and more highly skilled work force in fruit and vegetable production.

Brenemans Get Herd

Larry E. and Connie E. Breneman, Drumore, last fall purchased Paul Bryan's milking herd and recently completed the transaction by purchasing all the remaining calves and heifers, notes the Pennsylvania Golden Guernsey News.

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