

May 6, 2024

National Agricultural Statistics Service
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250

RE: Docket No. 0535-0109

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on your request to revise and extend the approved information collection for the Farm Labor Survey (FLS). We appreciate the work and professionalism of NASS and understand the importance of the data NASS collects to Michigan's agriculture community. However, we do have several concerns with the current FLS.

Many of the growers we represent are forced to use the H2-A program to secure the workers they need to harvest and prepare their crops for market because they are unable to find domestic workers. As NASS knows, the field and livestock combined gross wage rate is used by the Department of Labor to establish the Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR) each year. Consequently, the results of the FLS directly impact the economic viability of our growers.

We agree that the collection of information under the FLS is necessary. However, we are concerned that the response rates may not be large enough to secure data that accurately reflects the labor market in Michigan. In the Lake States Region, the response rates have dropped from about 65% in 2012 to about 40% in 2023 according to Michigan State University. This significant drop in response rates could be one reason why there is increased volatility in the AEWR from year to year and may contribute to rising AEWRs if the set of respondents who respond to the survey are increasingly skewed toward higher paying employers. When the FLS is compared to other farmworker wage surveys for the Lake States Region – the US Census Bureau's Community Population Survey (CPS), the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) and the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) – the FLS wage tends to be higher than the wage estimates for these surveys. We understand that from NASS's 30,000-foot view of its survey the results look fine, but when you're down on the ground where our growers actually farm, a 50 cent or one dollar per hour difference in the field and livestock combined gross wage rate makes a huge difference on the economic viability of our growers' operations.

We recommend that NASS remove H2-A workers from the survey. This would reduce the reporting burden for growers and eliminate a driver that may be leading to the significant escalation in the AEWR for the Lake States Region. If there is concern that the FLS is the only data set to measure the number of farmworkers in the United States, it can still be derived from the FLS along with the number of H2-A worker's issued visas by the US State Department. We believe reducing the reporting burden and ensuring that H2-A worker wages are not skewing the data has more value to our growers than providing one data set to count the number of farmworkers.

We also recommend greater transparency on how the survey is conducted and who is surveyed explained in layman's terms to increase response rates. Our growers are very suspicious of the

validity of the data because they attend grower meetings, ask who has ever gotten the survey and no one raises their hand. When you combine this with their lived experience that doesn't reflect the survey results, they think NASS is purposely skewing the data. We believe you are following statistical protocols, but this is not what growers believe so this could be impacting your survey response rates.

Finally, we are concerned that you have underestimated how long it takes to complete the survey. It appears daunting on its face and is sent at times when our growers are working in the fields. While this is no different than in past decades, Michigan's specialty crop farming operations are different – they have significant food safety audit and record keeping burdens, significant marketing burdens as they work to remain viable in the face of shrinking margins, and face significant operational challenges stemming from more volatile weather. These additional duties on top of the actual farming did not exist in the 20th century to the degree they do today. Michigan's specialty crop industry is made up of small and medium-sized growers who may not have office help who could review payroll records and complete the survey. We take issue with your characterization in the July 2021 Supporting Statement A regarding the information impacts to small entities – "Farms using a small number of workers generally provide the needed data without having to consult their record books". If growers are not looking at their payroll records to answer the survey, they are making an educated guess which could skew the data since NASS uses a gross average wage – they get the numerator correct (hourly wage) but may underestimate the denominator (hours worked) throwing off the data. We recommend that more be done to streamline the survey collecting only what is necessary, more clearly explaining why the information is being collected and why it's important, and a reexamination of the questions perhaps with a focus group of growers to be sure NASS is asking the questions in a way that is understood by their customers.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide our thoughts on how to improve the response rates and reduce the reporting burden on growers so we get survey results that better reflect wages on the ground across the Lake States Region.

Sincerely,

Potato Growers of Michigan
Michigan Asparagus Advisory Board
Michigan Blueberry Advisory Committee
Michigan Blueberry Commission
Michigan Cherry Committee
Michigan Farm Bureau
Michigan State Horticultural Society
Michigan Tree Fruit Commission
Michigan Vegetable Council