

**COMMUNITY FORESTRY RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM
FINAL REPORT, Masters Fellow 2002**

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Briefly summarize your research problem (include any hypotheses) and the goals of your research.

Driving through rural, heavily forested areas of Alabama during the winter months, one may be surprised to find that small dilapidated motels, houses and trailers are temporarily occupied by migrant tree planters and forest workers. For at least the past ten years, migrant workers from Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras have been recruited to work reforesting the Southeastern United States. Through a guest worker program known as the H-2B program, many of these migrant workers are brought into the country on temporary work visas to labor in the forests for as short a time as a couple of months to as long as one year.

Though largely an invisible workforce, these temporary migrants help sustain one of the largest industries in rural Alabama, the forest products industry. Through intermediaries known as forest labor contractors, they are issued H-2B visas and enter the country each year traveling throughout the Southeast, working on mostly privately owned lands. These migrant workers are in a unique situation: they work legally in the U.S., planting pine trees and applying herbicides, at wages set for U.S. workers, but are able to return to their home countries and spend their earnings there. This situation, the movement of guest workers between sending countries and Alabama and the Southeast, afforded the opportunity to examine the dynamics of recruitment of guest workers and resulting social networks, linkages between this migration and the organization of labor in the forest products industry. It also afforded the opportunity to focus on the social identity of workers as they traverse national borders. Although there are still some native workers performing these types of jobs, there is an increasing dependence on guest workers and other migrants to fill these positions. This study will illuminate some of the significant issues associated with the participation of guest workers in Alabama's forest products industry, such as how they are recruited, why many employers feel they must use guest workers and the interaction between guest workers and their employers.

This study was structured around three research objectives:

1. Describe and analyze the recruitment process for migrant and guest workers.
2. Describe labor organization for contract work in forest management, especially with regards to migrant and guest workers recruited for tree planting and herbicide application.
3. Explore the ways that migration affects the social identity of workers as they move between sending and receiving countries.

Outside of the research objectives, this project was also motivated by applied goals and the need to build community awareness and partnerships between migrant communities and organizations in the State of Alabama working for social justice and the sustainable use of natural resources. Many of these organizations are well equipped to increase the level of consciousness of the problems and needs faced by temporary workers coming to Alabama to work in the forests. I would like to use my research project as the context for bringing these organizations together, using their resources jointly to help promote community capacity and sustainable communities in rural Alabama. Based on previous experience working in rural Alabama with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, I know that there is an overwhelming need to create links between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the migrant community.

H2-B Guest Workers

Guest worker programs are not unique to the United States. Countries facing labor shortages often find it necessary to recruit foreign, most often temporary, workers. The United Kingdom and France often import workers from their former colonial holdings, explaining the presence of large numbers of Moroccans, Algerians and Tunisians in France and Indians, West Indians and Pakistanis in the UK (Faist 2000). Taiwan looks to the Philippines for household domestic help (Lan 2003). Since the 1960s, Germany has seen a huge influx of Turkish guest workers resulting from a recruitment agreement signed between the two countries (Faist 2000). In short, countries will occasionally import labor to fill positions which native labor is either unwilling or unable to fill.

The United States has a long history of recruiting labor from other countries, and it has a long-standing relationship with Mexico. Migration between Mexico and the United States had its beginning as early as the 1870s with railroads, copper mines and agricultural fields fueling the demand for labor (Massey et al. 1987). The *Bracero Accord*,¹ established in 1942 was a formal, temporary-worker arrangement between Mexico and the United States in response to labor shortage due to war (Bacon 2001, Massey et al. 1987, 1998). This arrangement, which lasted over twenty years, allowed over 4 million Mexicans to work legally in the United States (Massey et al. 1987). The *Bracero Accord* ended in 1964.

Other guest worker programs have since followed, such as the H1 and H2 guest worker programs (the letter H and number refer to the line and section amendment). The H-1B visa, introduced in the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1990 is designed for temporary workers in highly specialized occupations. Temporary workers on this visa work mostly in information technology or engineering in occupations such as computer programmers or software developers (Foner et al. 2000).

The H-2B visa guest worker program was implemented after the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) when there was a split for H2 worker visas; H-2A for seasonal agricultural workers and H-2B for non-professional, non-agricultural workers (Griffith et al.

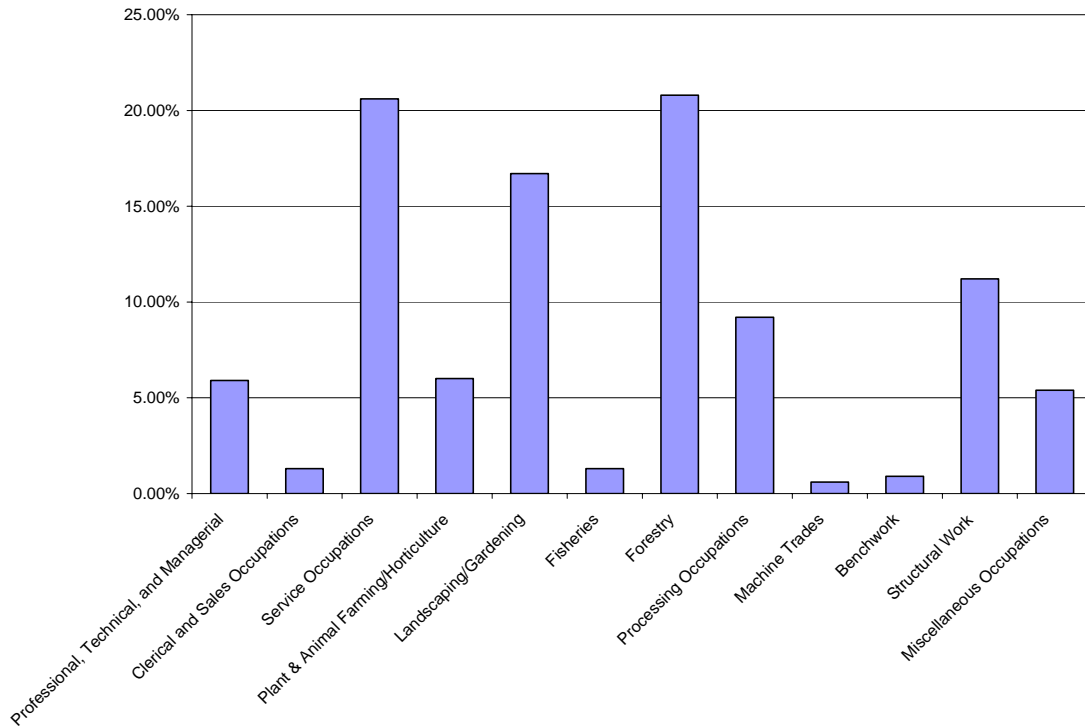
¹ The word *bracero* refers to one who works with his arm or hands; *brazo* is Spanish for arm.

2002). Both H-2A and H-2B visas are intended to prohibit employers from hiring illegal, undocumented workers.

In contrast to the H-2A visa, H-2B workers must pay for housing, transportation and taxes and they are also not guaranteed work. These H-2B “nonimmigrant workers” are employed in a variety of industries ranging from forestry and poultry in the Southeast to service positions in hotels and restaurants in coastal and resort cities. More specifically, employers in the state of Colorado bring in snow makers and shovelers for ski resorts; shellfish processors are brought into the Atlantic coastal states of Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina; cleaners and housekeepers are being brought into almost every state by hotels and resorts. David Griffith has written extensively on H-2B “crab pickers” in North Carolina (Griffith 1993, 1995, 1999). Make-up artists, gem cutters, stable attendants, singers, landscapers and sports instructors are also being issued H-2B visas. The H-2B visa program is defined as a “program that permits employers to hire foreign workers to come to the U.S. and perform temporary nonagricultural work, which may be one-time, seasonal, peak load or intermittent (www.ows.doleta.gov).” During each fiscal year of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), there is a limit of 66,000 H-2B visas granted.

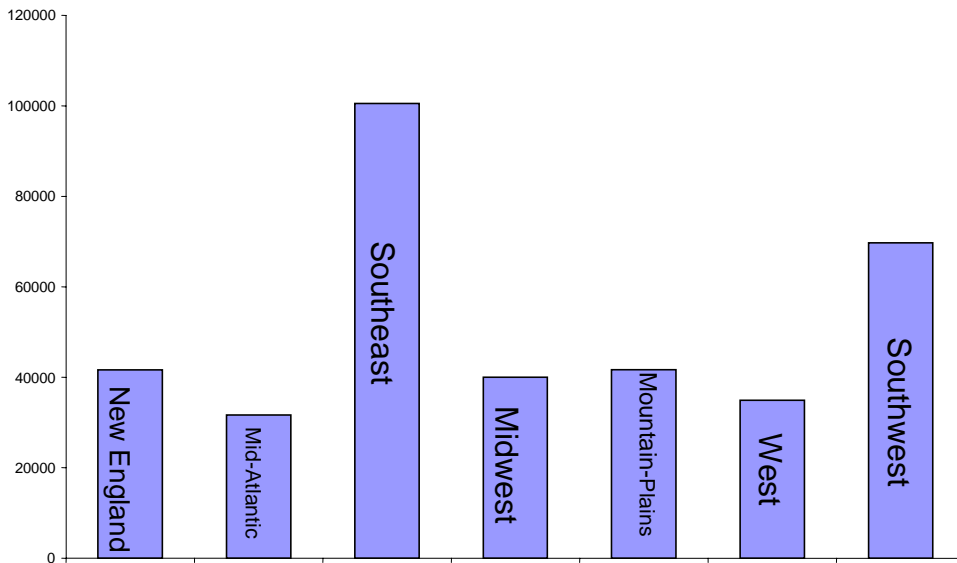
Use of the H-2B visa has become increasingly popular. In data obtained from the U.S. Department of Labor for the years 1996 through 2001, a total of 37,431 visas were requested from 18,981 different employers. Of these, 15,770 employers had their visa requests certified. Only 2,696 employers were denied certification, while 515 employers’ requests fall into an “other” category (withdrawn, returned after remand, forwarded). The maximum number of visas requested by a single employer is 1,530 (forestry, certified); many employers request only one visa, bringing the mean number of visas requested per employer to 18.97. For the years 1996 to 2001, the Southeast region of the U.S. led in the number of total visas requested. For the same years, forestry led all other employment sectors in requests for visas. Figures 1 and 2 present graphical depictions of these numbers.

Figure 1. Percent of total H-2B visas requested by occupation category, 1996 – 2001.



Source: Data Acquired from U.S. Department of Labor 2001.

Figure 2. Number of H-2B guest worker visas requested by region, 1996-2001.



Source: Data acquired from U.S. Department of Labor 2001.

Describe your field experience and data collection experience. Include a discussion of how your participatory research worked out.

One of the most important characteristics of migrant communities is their unbounded transnational spatial distribution and sociocultural dynamics (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc 1994; Kearney 1996). Migrant communities do not lend themselves easily to scientific sampling procedures. In many ways they represent a hidden population that is not easily approached for research (Schensul et al. 1999). Labor contractors are also difficult to approach. Many are worried about increasing government regulation and legal concerns of hiring documented and undocumented workers. They are also sensitive to negative publicity about wages, working conditions and treatment of migrant workers.

Building trust is essential to being able to work with both contractors and guest workers. I found that contractors who participate in the H-2B program were willing to allow me to interview their workers; they were open about their practices and mostly willing to provide access to their work crews for interviews and participant observation. Both the contractors and the workers are regulated and documented, so they were more inclined than contractors who did not participate in the H-2B program, to take part in this research project. They were also easy to identify through lists published by the Department of Labor.

During the spring of 2002, forest labor contractors were contacted for participation in a survey. Respondents who indicated they participated in the H-2B guest worker program were contacted by phone for involvement in this study. Contact with workers was gained through their respective employers. Contractors were chosen based on the size of their contracts and recruitment practices.

Some contractors refused to participate; others set stipulations, such as being present for all interviews with workers. These contractors were not included in the study. To expand on this point, one key informant, after being extremely forthcoming with information about the organization of his company and rationale in hiring guest workers got cold feet when it came time for me to talk to his workers. He repeatedly told me, “don’t do us wrong.” And after I had made plans to meet one of his herbicide crews, he called me and said that I could not spend time alone with any individual worker. His instructions were that I should talk to them as a group and only with the crew leader present. He also stipulated that I should arrange to meet them somewhere other than the tract they were working on. After agreeing to his stipulations, he called me the next day and told me that I should discuss any notes and findings with him.

Four forest labor contractors were involved in this study: three of the largest companies (measured by acres planted and visas requested) and one small forest contractor. Fictitious names are used in discussing these companies. Key informants within in each of the four companies granted permission to contact and also provided contact information for crew leaders. I then coordinated with crew leaders or land managers for days, times and sites. A total of 58 workers were interviewed in semi-structured interviews. In addition, 38 workers declined to be formally interviewed but participated in unstructured group discussions. These workers were chosen from the crews of four different contractors.

Within each company, employees with knowledge of hiring practices and guest workers were interviewed regarding the recruitment process and their perceptions of the H-2B guest worker program. A total of ten key informants from within these companies were used for this study. Five key informants from contractors and consultants who do not participate in the H-2B guest worker program were interviewed as well.

Getting into the Field

As a female researcher doing a study of essentially male forest workers, I thought a lot about a chapter in *Honor and the American Dream: Culture and Identity in a Chicano Community* by sociologist Ruth Horowitz (1983) called “Getting In.” In this chapter, Horowitz describes her fieldwork experience with young, Chicano gang members in a Chicago neighborhood and how she managed to ‘get in’ to the field. While tree planters and forest labor contractors are not exactly gang members, I spent time with and gathered information from a community that was quite alien to me. Much like Horowitz’s experience, my personal characteristics (female, Hispanic, bilingual, educated, limited knowledge of forestry, my style of dress, etc.) made a difference in how I was perceived by the community and also the kinds of questions I could ask. Ruth Horowitz found that being aware of the striking differences between researcher and community allowed her to better work within her own identity in the field.

Contacting forest labor contractors in order for me to actually get in to the field was a chore unto itself. Mentally preparing myself for the questions that were justifiably asked of me was somewhat exhausting. First of all, I had to assure contractors that I was not a journalist; I was not “the woman who wrote that article in the paper.” Secondly, I repeatedly had to explain my interest in the topic and defend the fact that I was a female and interested in the topic. More than once, I was asked, “How did you ever get interested in ‘them’?”

The fact that I was female, I believe, made people a bit suspicious about my intentions, usually leading to the question about me being a newspaper reporter or working for immigration. All but one of my key informants was male. Working through the suspicions, I found that being female and somewhat naïve about forestry actually helped. I was able to ask questions more than once and get detailed, explicit answers. Then there was the concern from contractors that “hardly none of ‘em speak English” and how did I plan to communicate with the workers? These issues all came up and had to be resolved before getting the go ahead to speak to the workers.

After getting through the first challenge (with four different contractors) I had to make phone calls to either land managers (consultants) or crew leaders and begin again the process of explaining who I was, and this time assuring them that I was not with INS. After I assured crew leaders and managers of my intentions, plans were made on when and where to meet. Usually I was given the names of motels, sometimes accurately spelled; other times a best-attempt pronunciation. When the latter was the case, I spent time on the Internet looking up names of towns and lists of motels that sounded like the place they were staying, then making a phone call to verify if indeed they were staying there.

As mentioned earlier, migrant workers are not the easiest population to work with. This is mostly true, because as their name suggests, they move around a lot. In coordinating with crews, I would ask how long they planned to be in a specific location. I was usually given a window of time, but was always told, “call before you come” just to make sure they were still there.

Once in the field, this process was, in ways, repeated. I had to establish and justify my presence. Like Horowitz, I did not attempt to become a member of the community. Physically, I am not capable of performing the work. So basically, I “hung out.” I took pictures, asked questions, talked to workers about what I was doing. I answered questions about school, about where I was from, about whether or not I was married, about whether or not I had any children. Mostly, once the ice was broken and workers realized I was not going away after a couple of hours, I felt that my presence was welcome.

In my case, “the field” was a variety of settings. Several times, “the field” was a planting site, the rest of the time, it was the parking lot of a motel. On one trip to the field, I was given a cell phone number and a general idea where the tree planting crew would be. Once I was close, I pulled over to call and found that there were no phone signals. In order to visualize where I was, one must think of a very rural, remote town and try to imagine what residents in this town would consider rural and remote. I drove somewhat aimlessly, for about two hours on dirt roads and logging trails. When I passed a car or truck, I would stop and ask if they had seen any tree planting crews. When this didn’t work, I gave the name of the land manager. Finally, I was pointed down a particular road where I saw an open access gate to a logging road. Knowing my car couldn’t possibly climb that hill, I parked and got out and walked for about a mile until I found them.

There were never any assurances from the contractors or crew leaders that workers would talk to me. So I stood around at the truck, around where seedlings were gathered or close to a fire and struck up conversations as best I could. Tree planting is done in the winter and workers may take breaks by a fire to warm their hands. While some of the workers were clearly bothered that I would interrupt their work, I think that having a conversation with me, for some, was somewhat cathartic.

While I conducted 58 in-depth interviews, quantity did not assure quality. Many of the interviews were simply interviews, me asking questions and an informant answering them. However, mixed in with these straightforward interviews were several in-depth conversations in which I felt a sense of connectedness and trust with the workers. I especially sensed this when the workers were talking about their families and children or describing home. Although all the information I gathered was valuable, the richness of a small number of conversations formed the bulk of this study.

Participatory Research?

Throughout my research I questioned whether or not my study was actually “participatory research.” Did my community initiate the research? No. Did my community

formulate the research questions? Only to some extent. So, was this actually participatory research?

Since becoming a fellow in 2002, I have taken part in numerous workshops and attended various seminars centered around participatory research. I have listened to presentations from communities engaged in research. I found myself asking, what elements need to be in place in order for a community to engage in their own research and are these elements present in the community I worked with?

The essential element, I believe, is community capacity (defined by Kusel and Baker (2003) as “the financial, physical, human, cultural and social capital necessary to develop...and promote community well-being and worker well-being”). Within my study community of temporary, transnational guest workers I found that providing for families in sending countries was the priority, often above worker well-being. So, although I would not say that community capacity is altogether lacking, there are other issues that are central to the workers. Identifying and addressing workers’ issues are the first step in building a foundation for community capacity and future participatory research with migrant forest workers in the Southeast.

Discuss your preliminary findings and analysis. How do they relate to your original goals/hypotheses?

1. Describe and analyze the recruitment process for migrant and guest workers.
 - Recruitment strategies differ between the 3 large companies and the smaller company
 - Gatekeepers and migrant networks provide access to jobs for the large companies
 - Small company actively and personally recruits its labor
 - Evidence of regional preference in recruiting

There is evidence in all of the companies of migrant networks and recruitment based on kinship. Network recruitment and recruitment based on kinship is advantageous to the employer because it results in a workforce that knows and trusts each other. Moreover, there are preexisting authoritative relationships – for example, on one crew, an older worker recommended two of his sons-in-law. In the interest of ensuring that his daughters are taken care of, he pushes them to work hard each day.

Three of the four contractors specified a regional preference for recruiting...two recruit from Mexico, the other from Guatemala. The fourth company had workers from four different countries on their crews. Thus, migrant networks are being formed that link rural Alabama to traditional and non-traditional sending communities in Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Brazil.

2. Describe labor organization for contract work in forest management, especially with regards to migrant and guest workers recruited for tree planting and herbicide application.
 - Clear distinction between 3 large companies and 1 small company
 - Small company directly employs and supervises guest workers while large companies sell or rent labor to foresters and land managers

Workers for the 3 large companies are brought to the company’s headquarters, assigned

to crews and dispersed according to contracts and demand. They work for a crew leader who is responsible for communicating with foresters and land managers, finding housing and filing paper work. Large companies have brought in as many as 1500 workers in a single year, in contrast to the smaller company who brings in only 30 workers.

3. Explore the ways that migration affects the social identity of workers as they move between sending and receiving countries.

The workers share a sense of solidarity and a pride in their ability to work hard and provide for their families, nuclear or extended. They are each individuals from different places and with different histories and even different aspirations. They all have hope that the great sacrifice of time away from their families will pay off in the form of housing, land and education. In interviews and conversations, I was struck by the fact that the work they were hired to do could be anything, there was not an explicit interest in forest work. The type of work is completely incidental. The interest was in making a better life for themselves and their families. Time away from home and family is a hardship for the workers. Many expressed a desire to have children or spouses visit them while they were working. The transition between social spaces, the time away from families and familiar places is tied into social identity.

What is the benefit of your research to the community?

I found the community of migrant tree planters to be largely isolated from the day to day life of local communities. My contact with them afforded them the opportunity to ask questions of someone other than their employers regarding issues ranging from educational opportunities to income taxes. There was also the cathartic benefit of sharing experiences and stories of family and home.

In terms of benefits to the community as a whole, I feel that my research has raised the level of awareness of many NGOs and local communities as to the presence of guest workers, the nature of the work they perform and their economic contribution to the forest products industry and the State of Alabama.

Lessons learned. Include any suggestions you may have for improving the CFRF program.

Participatory research is an approach that applied researchers should aspire to. But we must first examine the elements within communities that are essential to this approach. This is something I plan to research further.