

The Hispanic

Our industry's appetite for landscape laborers from south of the border just keeps growing and growing

BY RON HALL / SENIOR EDITOR

The green mountains of central Mexico, once the source of most of the world's silver, are giving up yet another precious commodity — workers.

U.S. industry is tapping rural Mexico for able-bodied laborers with the same desperate eagerness that the Spaniards of the 17th century sought precious metals. This time the Mexicans, many of whom are grossly under-employed, eagerly oblige.

In fact, they're so willing to work that they often go to incredible lengths — and often at great danger to themselves — to do so. As many as 50,000 migrants sneak across the border illegally each month, say authorities.

Most are seeking employment. Many intend to stay in the United States.

A smaller number of alien workers enter the payrolls of U.S. firms through sanctioned programs. The most popular with landscapers is H-2B, an alien worker program that allows seasonal employment of unskilled workers when domestic labor is unavailable.

Labor-starved landscapers snatch up both sources of labor. But the firms

that want to make sure their foreign-born workers will be around the entire season are increasingly using H-2B.

H-2B, born during an overhaul of U.S. immigration laws in 1986, has a quota of 66,000 workers annually. About 93% of H-2B certified workers come from Mexico, says C. Scott Evans, operator of the labor solutions firm SILC-H2B, Bay City, TX.

The rules for U.S. businesses wanting to participate in the program are relatively simple, but most landscapers discover that completing its many requirements are tedious and that rounding up the workers can be daunting, particularly the first year they need H-2B workers.

The program, in addition to giving landscapers a source of labor, has spawned a handful of "labor solutions" entrepreneurs.

For a price, these labor specialists will find

the alien workers and wade through the documentation that qualifies them for U.S. employment.

The price of labor

How much does it cost to obtain H-2B certified workers? The price varies depending on which of the several labor contractors you deal with. Generally, the more workers you need, the lower the price of each one. But at least one labor contractor charges a flat fee no matter how many.

If your landscape firm requires 100 or more workers, you may pay as little as \$325 annually per worker, says Robert Wingfield,



RANDY LYHIUS

Partnership

who's been finding Mexican labor for landscapers for more than a decade at Amigos Labor Solutions, Dallas. But if you only need a few laborers, you could pay as much as \$650 per employee, he says.

But Scott Evans, SILC-H2B, says: "I've never quite figured out how to charge per worker." He charges a flat fee no matter how many workers a company needs. He says the amount of legwork needed to gain H-2B certification for 10 workers is essentially the same as it is for 1,000.

Even so, somebody still has to recruit and make sure the workers have the necessary paperwork in Latin America.

The take home message: Check out the qualifications of the labor contracting firm. Ask for the names of clients.

Putting a price tag on human labor seems like a cold-blooded way to calculate the worth of fellow humans. But don't forget that H-2B workers base their actions on dollar signs, too.

Labor in Mexico is abundant and cheap. The average salary for an auto worker at a Mexican assembly plant is \$.90 an hour compared to U.S. workers, who makes over \$20 an hour for essentially the same

work. And when H-2B workers arrive in the U.S., they expect to work at least 50 hours a week at fair laborers' wages. Most send a portion of their earnings back to Mexico to support families, and many return to their homes in November or December with \$4,000 or \$5,000 in their pockets.

Most companies that already have H-2B workers have little difficulty keeping them (at

least the ones they want) or adding to their numbers. That is, if they treat them fairly and with proper respect.

There's the story of the landscaper in southeastern Michigan who grew complacent with his Mexican construction crew and was lax about getting everyone back. After struggling through the first two months of the following season with labor he had managed (with great difficulty) to recruit locally, the business owner literally

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Robert Wingfield

Seasonal labor users join forces

U.S. companies using the H-2B seasonal alien worker program are banding together. About 180 individuals and companies have already joined the fledgling National H2B Users Association (NHUA), reports C. Scott Evans, Bay City, TX, who is heading the group.

Individuals and companies that are dependent on the continued availability of seasonal labor from outside U.S. borders make up the majority of NHUA's membership. These include landscape, construction and hospitality firms, among others. The group also includes companies that recruit and place H-2B workers, says Evans, president of one such firm, SILC-H2B.

Evans says that he will be at the Green Industry Expo, Indianapolis, IN, Nov. 5-7, to promote the NHUA.

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greeted the return of his seasonal foreign employees with hugs. Not only that, but he began treating them with newfound respect.

"The best recruiting opportunities come when a company can recruit within itself or within its community," says Evans. "You'll get good workers by asking your existing foreign workers if they have rela-

tives or friends who would like to work for your company.

"This solves a lot of problems. The new worker will already have a friend when he arrives, he will likely have a place to live and he will have a ride to and from work."

Get a move on it

You may or may not be in a similar situa-

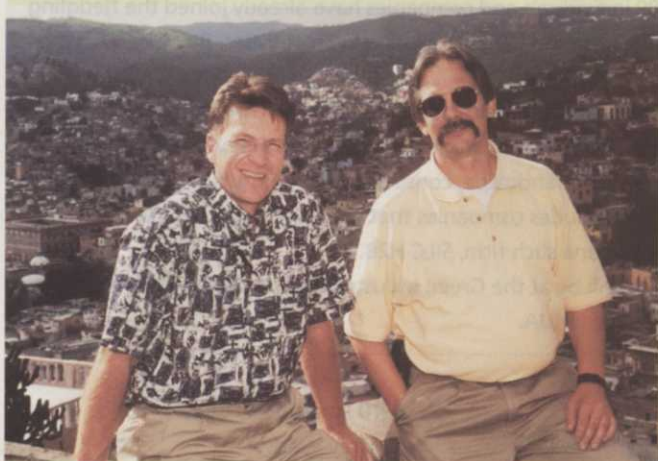
tion, but if you're considering employing legal Hispanic labor in your landscape operation for next season, begin the process now. It's going to take you about 120 days to meet the requirements.

To qualify for seasonal workers through H-2B, you must convince authorities that you can't find a sufficient number of local or domestic workers. This isn't a difficult

More value from trained workers

Several years ago, Jeff West, who runs the labor recruiting company GTO International LLC, Rochester, MI, traveled to Mexico. His goal was to establish a week-long program to train Mexican workers for seasonal employment in the U.S. Green Industry.

He felt, and continues to feel, that a trained worker — any trained worker — is more valuable to the U.S. Green Industry than an untrained worker.



Jeff West, left, and Douglas "Buck" Buchanan operate GTO International out of offices in Rochester, MI, and Guanajuato, Mexico.

West's goal was to train Mexicans how to operate mowers and other landscape maintenance and construction equipment. But he also thought they should be advised on more practical matters, such as simple English language instruction.

"We wanted to give the people in the program an idea of what to expect when they arrived on the job in the United States," says West. "We wanted to let them know that the

streets aren't paved with gold and the work will be hard. We wanted to get them off to a good start because we knew that the first year on the job is the hardest."

At the time, West was director of golf at a championship caliber golf course in southeastern Michigan that needed seasonal workers.

Also, he was just beginning his own company to access and deliver Mexican workers to U.S. companies who needed seasonal help.

Mexican officials liked West's idea. They whisked him to 10 different locations within the country in as many days, seeking a suitable site for the training program.

West selected Guanajuato, a quaint jewel of a colonial city with about 100,000 residents. It's set in a narrow mountain valley in central Mexico, easily accessible because of good roads in all directions and an international airport at nearby Leon, a city of about 1 million people.

That first program turned out to be both a success and a failure, says West.

"We lost money," he explains. "Obviously, we couldn't charge the workers money to participate, and when we asked landscapers if they would pay more for a trained worker, they said no."

On the plus side, almost all of the 20 workers who completed the program turned out to be excellent employees, returning to work for the same employer each spring. In fact, several now speak English and perform skilled tasks.

West continues to travel to Mexico to re-establish a training program for Mexicans seeking seasonal employment in the U.S. landscape industry.

He also remains convinced that, in the long run, U.S. firms will see the value in hiring better-trained workers.

"The best recruiting opportunities come when a company can recruit within itself or within its community." — C. Scott Evans, SILC-H2B

task. In most parts of the country, there is a shortage of local applicants to work for the wages you pay laborers. Even so, most landscapers seem more inclined to pay labor contractors (see our list) to recruit foreign workers than wade through the paperwork themselves.

Wingfield, of Amigos, says that every year, U.S. businesses get closer to filling the H-2B quota of 66,000 workers, so companies planning to use H-2B should get a move on it.

"The landscape industry isn't the only industry that needs and wants these workers," says Wingfield. "Anybody who has a seasonal need can get them."

Well, almost anybody. Landscape com-

panies in the states of Arizona and California have difficulty convincing authorities that their labor needs are seasonal.

In other states (or particular regions within a state), a complicated set of federal regulations has set the wages for laborers so high that contractors can't afford to meet them. The H-2B program mandates that alien seasonal workers be paid the prevailing wage for labor in the area the company operates in. In Long Island, NY, for instance, this wage approaches \$13 an hour, too high a figure for most contractors there.

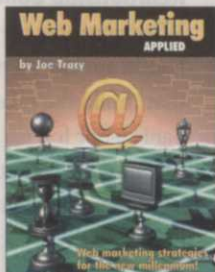
"I think the U.S. Department of Labor

and the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) are trying to tweak these programs," says Wingfield. "I don't think they expected the response from all of the industries."

For example, authorities in some states are demanding to see some landscape company payroll records to make sure their Hispanic workers are truly seasonal.

Even so, H-2B remains the most popular and surest route to gaining landscape labor. That's not likely to change in the short term, insists Wingfield.

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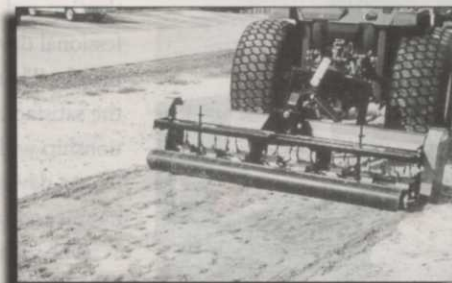
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