

Fact Sheet

Mexican Immigration in Rural Oregon

Four Waves of Mexicans in Oregon

- *In 1821 Oregon Country's southern border constituted the U.S. territorial border with Mexico. Mexicans have traded, worked, and lived in Oregon ever since. In the early 1900s, the first temporary workers program allowed Mexicans, who would have been ineligible to enter under the 1917 Immigration Act, to work seasonally in the U.S. By 1924, Portland became a recruiting place for Mexicans who worked in sugar beet and hop farms. They were also employed by railroad companies.*
- *During the Great Depression many Mexican workers were repatriated, but others remained or were recruited again to work in Hood River orchards and Willamette Valley farms. From 1942 to 1947, the Bracero Program contracted more than 15,000 Mexican laborers in Oregon. Other Mexicans worked on the railroads, planted pines for the U.S. Forest Service, and were forest fire fighters.*
- *From the end of the Bracero Program to the 1970s, Northwest growers hired Mexican-American migratory laborers recruited from California, Texas, and the Southwest. They also hired Mexican laborers from the Mexican states of San Luis Potosi, Sonora, Hidalgo, and Nuevo Leon. The first families settled in Woodburn, Independence, Hubbard, and Saint Paul in the early 1950s. Families also set roots in Nyssa and Ontario.*
- *In the 1970s, another wave of Mexican migrants came to rural Oregon from Michoacan, and indigenous Oaxacans. They worked through contractors in reforestation projects and in the off-season looked for jobs in farms, tree nurseries, and canneries. The Valley Migrant League provided day-care, adult education and job skills to immigrants. The short-lived Colegio Cesar Chavez in Mt. Angel was the first Chicano college in the U.S.*
- *In 1986 the Immigration Reform Act (IRCA) and the accompanying Seasonal Agricultural Workers (SAW) provision made it possible for many workers to become permanent residents. More than 23,000 Mexicans and Guatemalans benefited from these programs. During the next ten years, spouses, children, siblings, and parents of legalized workers settled in rural Oregon.*
- *Many of these arrivals were indigenous peoples. Researchers have documented fourteen different indigenous groups and languages among Mexican and Guatemalan immigrants in our state.*
- *The communities where they settle in often share a regional culture that marked Mexicans as racially inferior, suitable for hard physical labor, and politically vulnerable.*

Recent Mexican Immigration

- *The jobs of recent Mexican immigrants usually have some combination of low pay, unstable employment, little prospect for advancement, and dangerous working conditions. Many live in so called "mixed-status" families where a member may have an undocumented immigration status, others are permanent residents, and the youngest are citizens. Generally this is the case for about half of the most recent Mexican immigrants.*
- *Second generation children are in rural schools. City government, the police, the local courts and the health clinics in small towns find themselves in need of providing interpreting and translation services for Spanish-speakers. Churches offer bilingual services.*