

## REVIEW

# Development of Temporary and Seasonal Agricultural Labor Forces in Japan

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### Abstract

This paper presented a literature review of the actual situation and efforts in securing temporary and seasonal agricultural labor forces in Japan. Until the 1990s, farmers can secure temporary agricultural labor forces from within their communities in most parts of Japan. However, with the decrease in the number of farmers, labor shortages in the horticultural sector became apparent in the 2000s. In Hokkaido, the temporary agricultural labor forces were provided by a group of female laborers; however, from the late 1990s, the aging of these women began to raise the issue of labor shortages. Therefore, job offers were spread to more regions, but securing laborers in the domestic labor market became difficult in recent years. Under these circumstances, the foreign technical training system played a role in the acceptance of foreign agricultural laborers, but there were many restrictions on accepting foreign workers as temporary or seasonal labor forces. Alternatively, from 2019, the “Specified Skilled Worker Systems” was started, making it possible to accept foreign agricultural laborers more flexibly. This means that the target regions for job offers are expanding beyond national borders.

**Discipline:** Social Science

**Additional key words:** securing labor force, agricultural laborer, foreign labor, labor shortage

## Introduction

Highly labor-intensive crops, such as fruit trees and vegetables, require a large number of labor forces during the harvest season. In most developed countries, foreigners constitute a significant portion of this labor force. Gertel & Sippel (2014) report that the production of fresh fruit trees and vegetables in the Mediterranean coastal areas of southern and western Europe depends on seasonal workers from Eastern Europe, North Africa, and Latin America. Martin (2017) notes that more than 70% of the 1.8 million workers employed in US arable agricultural land were Mexican-born. Nishikawa & Kanou (2018) mention New Zealand’s Recognized Seasonal Employer scheme, which allowed Pacific Islanders to engage in agricultural work in New Zealand for 7 months in 2006. In 2011, Australia launched a similar scheme (Seasonal Worker Program) mainly

against the backdrop of declining backpacker numbers.

Japan is unique in that it has secured most of the seasonal and temporary agricultural labor forces from domestic laborers. However, since the latter half of the 2010s, all industries, including the agricultural sector, have been experiencing a serious labor shortage in Japan. Under the circumstances, foreign agricultural workers are attracting increasing attention. Like other developed countries, will Japan have to secure foreign temporary and seasonal agricultural laborers in the future? To consider this question, it is necessary to clarify when the seasonal and temporary agricultural labor shortage arose in Japan, how Japan has secured temporary and seasonal agricultural labor forces within the country, and to what extent legislation is being developed to introduce foreign labor. However, until now, no study has been conducted to systematically address the points above. This paper presents a literature review of the actual situation and

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efforts in securing temporary and seasonal agricultural labor forces in Japan.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the characteristics of Japan's agricultural labor force and agricultural employment from the perspective of temporary and seasonal labor forces. Section 3 reviews the efforts to secure temporary and seasonal agricultural laborers from the domestic labor market in Hokkaido. Section 4 reviews the transition of the legislation to introduce foreign labor in Japan, mainly from the perspective of securing temporary and seasonal agricultural laborers. Section 5 concludes the study.

### **Characteristics of the agricultural labor forces and agricultural employment in Japan**

For a long time after World War II, agriculture in Japan was maintained by small-scale family businesses. Until the 1980s, the agricultural labor force was in excess rather than in shortage and was positioned as a source of labor for other industries (Yamazaki 2010), and about 40% of the agricultural employment time was secured by farmers who help each other (Lee 2004). However, in the 1990s, the supply of workers from agriculture to other industries had declined significantly (Yamazaki 2010). After 1990, mutual help among farmers also declined (Lee 2004). Having said that, Ishida & Uchida (1993) point out that 77.1% of the workers who were employed in agriculture in 1993 directly employed their relatives or acquaintances. In other words, until the 1990s, farmers could secure temporary agricultural labor forces from within their community rather than the labor market. Lee (2004) points out that until the 2000s, there were very few studies on agricultural employment except in Hokkaido, as will be discussed later. This means that agricultural labor shortages were hardly a problem.

In the 2000s, the problem of labor shortage became apparent in some types of crops. Ashida (2009) reports that most of the temporary labor force for rice cultivation was secured from relatives (including those who had left the family) as of the mid-2000s. However, Lee (2004) points out that in the early 2000s, 30%-40% of farmers in open field vegetables and fruit trees were worried about securing labor forces. According to the Census of Agriculture in Japan, the number of selling farmers decreased from 3.31 million in 1985 to 2.37 million in 2000, and agricultural workers were aging year by year. Therefore, it is thought that it had become difficult to secure agricultural labor forces from within farmer's communities in labor-intensive horticultural crops from this period.

### **Efforts and limitations of securing seasonal agricultural laborer force in Hokkaido**

As described earlier, it is clear that securing laborers from within the farming community was becoming increasingly difficult. Therefore, this section reviews studies on efforts to secure temporary and seasonal laborers from the domestic labor market while focusing on Hokkaido. Hokkaido was chosen as the target because farmers had secured temporary and seasonal agricultural laborers through the labor market rather than farmer's communities as in other prefectures, the labor shortage became apparent quickly. For this reason, labor shortage countermeasures had been active, and numerous studies focused on them.

In the late 1980s, Imai (1991) conducted a study in Hokkaido, focusing on seasonal agricultural laborers employed during the peak farming season from April to November. In Hokkaido, the demand for seasonal agricultural laborers increased with the introduction of vegetables and horticulture in 1980. By 1986, Hokkaido was five times more dependent on employment than other prefectures. According to Imai, at that time, seasonal agricultural laborers were composed of housewives who had no other place to work, former farmers, self-employed workers, coal mine workers, and part-time farmers. These women were employed by the Japan Agricultural Cooperatives (JA) and were sent to farmers in groups of several individuals. Additionally, the recruitment and demand adjustment of agricultural laborers were done by the JA.

However, there was a labor shortage in the 1990s due to the aging of these women. The measures taken to address labor shortages can be divided into two main categories. First, management practices were reviewed. Konno (2014) reported that since the latter half of the 2000s, the JA had been taking the initiative in streamlining agricultural work by mechanizing and changing cropping systems and in promoting the fulltime employment of seasonal agricultural workers through diversification of business in cooperation with transport companies.

Second, the job offers were spread to more regions. Initially expanded to neighboring municipalities (Imai 1991), the scope of job offers later expanded to urban areas within and outside the prefecture. Fukusawa et al. (2017) conducted a research study on the "farm helpers" in the Furano region. Starting in 1996, this project organized seasonal agricultural laborers visiting Furano and dispatched them to farmers. From early April to mid-October, the workers stayed in dormitories and worked on the farm while staying in Furano. Their

motivation was like that of backpackers in Australia. Some aim to earn money in a short time, whereas others focus on sightseeing and agricultural experience. However, Fukusawa et al. (2017) pointed out that many of the workers moved from job to job, and about half of them did not wish to work in the next year. Takahata (2019) studied the dispatch of agricultural laborers from urban to rural areas in Hokkaido in the early 2010s. He reported that many dispatched workers lived in urban areas and moved from one job to another. The more frequently that dispatched workers change jobs, the lower is their evaluation as a labor force. Therefore, the use of agricultural dispatching also carried the risk of dispatching workers of low quality. Nevertheless, farmers used dispatch because it was easier to secure laborers.

As described earlier, the horticultural crop in Hokkaido was supported by a group of female workers who specialized in seasonal agricultural laborer; however, by the 1990s, a labor shortage became apparent due to the aging of these women. Under these circumstances, farm management was being reviewed as a response to labor shortage. Moreover, the target area for job offers expanded from neighboring municipalities to urban areas in and out of the prefecture. However, in recent years, the availability of domestic laborers had been unstable, and the quality of laborers has been declining.

### **Development of legislation on foreign agricultural labor forces in Japan**

As can be seen, it is becoming increasingly difficult to secure temporary and seasonal agricultural labor forces from the domestic labor market. Under these circumstances, foreign agricultural workers are attracting attention. Horiguchi (2019) points that most of the foreign agricultural labor in Japan came through the foreign technical internship system. Of the 31,000 foreign agricultural labor in 2018, technical interns accounted for 27,900. Therefore, the technical internship system will be reviewed first.

The foreign technical internship system was launched in 1993. Fearing the impact on the domestic labor market, Japan has not accepted foreigners as simple laborers (Miyairi 2018). Therefore, the technical intern training system is based on the premise of international contribution to human resource development in developing countries, but it is a means to secure unskilled foreign workers (Horiguchi 2017). Miyairi (2018) reported that the period of stay for technical interns was originally 2 years, but now, they could stay for up to 5 years. In addition, since 2010, technical trainees have been considered employees rather than trainees and are

required to have insurance and be paid a minimum wage. Gunji (2017) pointed out that most of the foreigners at first were Chinese; however, in recent years, the number of Vietnamese had been increasing.

Initially, the foreign technical internship program was targeted at the manufacturing sector, but in 2000, the program was extended to include the agricultural sector. This coincides with the time when labor shortages were beginning to become an issue in agriculture. However, many problems were encountered in accepting technical interns as temporary or seasonal laborers. Miyairi (2018) pointed out that foreign technical interns could work for up to 5 years, but they could not return to their home country temporarily. Additionally, the same person could not join the technical intern training system more than once. Therefore, new trainees must be accepted every year when accepting technical interns as seasonal agricultural laborers for 7-8 months. In addition, because technical interns cannot be dispatched, they cannot meet farmers' demand for spotting temporary agricultural labor forces.

Nevertheless, the "Specified Skilled Worker Systems" was launched in 2019 as a system that can meet the demand for temporary agricultural foreign labor forces. The conditions for certification as a specified skilled worker are that the foreign national must pass the skills and Japanese language proficiency test or complete a second technical internship. Ishida (2018) pointed out that unlike the technical intern training system, this system is aimed at solving the labor shortage and allows a foreign worker to reenter, be dispatched, or change jobs in the same field. Therefore, they can be employed only during the peak season. Moreover, if they are employed by agricultural dispatch companies, they can respond to spot labor needs.

### **Conclusion**

In Japan, it was relatively easy to secure temporary agricultural labor forces until around the 1990s because they could be secured from farmer's communities, except in some areas. However, due to the decrease in the number of farmers and aging, labor shortage became apparent in horticulture in the 2000s. In Hokkaido, unlike other prefectures, temporary and seasonal agricultural laborers were secured through the labor market. However, labor shortages had already become a problem in the 1990s due to the aging of female workers employed as temporary and seasonal agricultural laborers. In response to labor shortage, farmers rationalized their operations and changed their crops. Meanwhile, the scope of job offers continued to expand beyond the region.

Nevertheless, in recent years, it has become difficult to secure domestic laborers, and the quality of laborers has been declining.

Since 2000, agriculture has been covered by the foreign technical internship system, but there were many restrictions on accepting foreign technical interns as seasonal or temporary laborers. In other words, until recently, Japan had no system that assumed the acceptance of temporary or seasonal agricultural labor forces from overseas. The “Specified Skilled Worker Systems,” which started in 2019, is attracting attention as a system that can meet the demand for seasonal and temporary agricultural labor forces. The initiation of such a system itself reflects the difficulty of securing temporary and seasonal agricultural laborers from within the country.

Certainly, to some extent, the agricultural labor shortage can be addressed by improving labor productivity through the introduction of AI and robots, which is expected to develop in the future, and changing the crop mix. Nevertheless, based on past cases in Hokkaido, it is believed that measures to address labor shortages through management efforts will have their limits in the medium to long term. Therefore, it is necessary to expand the target area for job offers. However, since no room for expansion can be found in the domestic labor market, it is necessary to expand the target beyond national borders. In other words, the introduction of foreign labor forces as temporary and seasonal agriculture labor can be positioned as part of the structural problem of the shortage of temporary and seasonal agricultural labor supply and of the expansion of target areas for job offers. Thus, it is expected to develop in the future, although it will be affected by increase in labor productivity, the business cycle, and the restrictions on foreign entry due to COVID-19 pandemic.

However, Ishida (2018) pointed out that the “Specified Skilled Worker Systems” lacks discussion of important issues such as how long the supply of foreign workers from sending countries will last, how to implement measures against disappearances, social compensation systems, and livelihood support, and whether this system constitutes an immigration system. It will be necessary to keep a close eye on the extent to which the introduction of foreign workers into Japan’s temporary and seasonal agricultural labor forces will progress and what problems will arise.

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