

Del Norte County experiencing a drop in employment

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Del Norte County, California is experiencing a significant decline in farm labor, reflecting broader changes in the state's agricultural sector. Recent data from October 2024 reveals a concerning trend in both the number of farms and available farm labor in the county.

The number of farms in Del Norte County has decreased by 26% since 2012, dropping from 122 to just 90 in 2017. This reduction in agricultural establishments has had a ripple effect on the local farm labor market.

As of October 2024, Del Norte County's labor force stood at 9,700, with 9,180 employed and 520 unemployed, resulting in an unemployment rate of 9.4%. This rate is higher than California's overall unemployment rate of 5.4% for the same period.

Del Norte County's agricultural landscape is dominated by livestock production, accounting for 74% of sales, with crops making up the remaining 26%. The county is known for its lily bulb production, with bulbs, corms, rhizomes, and tubers covering 350 acres as of 2017.

Despite the decline in farm numbers, the total market value of agricultural products sold in Del Norte County increased by 22% between 2012 and 2017, reaching \$43,390,000. However, this growth in sales has not translated to an increase in farm labor.

The decline in farm labor is not unique to Del Norte County but reflects a statewide trend. California's farm labor market is undergoing significant changes due to rising labor costs, technological advancements, and increased competition from imports. These factors are pushing farmers to explore alternatives to traditional farm labor, such as mechanization and the use of H-2A guest workers.

There has also been a significant drop in federal and California state employment in Del Norte County. Government jobs, including Federal, State, and local, lost 130 positions between 2010 and 2019, a 4% decline. In 2024 has seen a 12.5% drop in federal employment, and a loss of 3.8% in state jobs. Most of this decline was in State Prison employment, as the inmate population has also decreased. While the number of federal jobs declined during this period, local government employment has increased slightly.

The situation In Del Norte County continues to reflect broader shifts In California's agricultural sector. As the industry grapples with an aging workforce, rising costs, and changing regulations, the future of farm labor in the county remains uncertain. Local authorities and agricultural stakeholders will need to collaborate on innovative solutions to ensure the continued viability of farming in Del Norte County while addressing the changing labor landscape.