

Work Day & Pay

The starting date of the harvest varies from year to year, depending on the weather. Growers try to bring their workers in a little ahead of the harvest, to ensure there will be an adequate workforce as soon as the berries are ripe. When workers arrive they must receive safety training and there is paperwork involved in setting up payroll. When there are enough ripe berries to begin picking, workers are generally brought into the field for one or two shortened days before the harvest goes into full swing. Some growers will put their workers in the field for a full day immediately upon their arrival. If workers arrive as much as five to seven days before the harvest, they are not making any money while they wait, which is a hardship for those who do not have money to tide them over.

As early as six a.m., seven days a week, buses begin shuttling workers to the fields. Those who arrive first must sometimes wait for the bushes to dry off, if there has been dew or rain. The berries will spoil if they are picked wet. While the buses head back for their next load of workers, those waiting to begin picking have nowhere to sit and no shade to stand in. Calculations are supposed to be made, to ensure workers earn the equivalent of minimum wage counting their hours on the job, including hours in transit, hours waiting in the field, and hours picking. It's questionable whether all crew bosses even attempt these calculations. The most frustrating day for workers is when it rains off and on. They may be bused back to camp, but if the sun comes out they will head back out to the fields. It's frustrating for the growers, too, who have people in the packing house waiting for truckloads of berries to process. (Continued next page)



Workers in these photos are carrying the plastic buckets which get emptied into larger trays.

While in the fields, workers tie a plastic bucket or box around their waists. When they have filled this bucket with berries, they dump it into a larger tray. As they move down the row of berries, they move the tray to keep it in view. When they have one or two or more trays full, they carry everything to the field truck. The trays will be inspected to be sure there are not too many leaves, stems or green berries. If the trays are accepted, the worker is given a ticket for each tray. The tickets are used for figuring pay. At one camp each tray might bring the worker \$2.75 and at another camp it might be \$3.00, but comparisons are difficult as the trays are not a uniform size from one camp to the next.

The workday ends between seven and eight p.m., sometimes later depending how quickly the berries are ripening. On payday some workers may still work a whole day, while many take off a few hours early to cash their paychecks. Taxes are deducted from the paychecks, just as for non-agricultural jobs.



Above (left) Open sided field truck with trays of blueberries
Above (right) Stacked berry trays ready to be processed –
The photo on the right was taken outside the packing house.
There are no shade trees out in the blueberry fields.