W1331

Tennessee Nursery Industry Use of the H-2A Visa Program

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Introduction

United States nursery operations depend heavily on labor to complete all production activities. Labor expenses represent almost 35 percent of the total input expenses for nursery operations (Fulcher et al., 2023). Like other labor-intensive agricultural industries, access to reliable sources of labor is a top priority and concern for the U.S. nursery industry (Fields & Bampasidou, 2022). Results from the 2025 Nursery Management Magazine survey suggest labor-related challenges are some of the most significant problems the nursery industry will face in 2025, including labor costs, lack of qualified labor and other labor-related challenges (Nursery Management, 2025).

Following national trends, results from a 2020 survey of Tennessee greenhouse and nursery operators suggest that the ability to hire and retain local labor was one of the biggest challenges these operators faced (Velandia et al., 2021). When survey respondents were asked about the strategies they used to overcome labor challenges, paying higher wages was one of the top strategies used. In contrast, the use of the H-2A temporary agricultural worker visa program, also known as the H-2A program, was one of the least used strategies to overcome labor challenges among survey respondents (Velandia et al., 2021). This could be related to the high cost associated with using this program (Wei et al., 2024). Costs related to using the program beyond wages include application, filing, consulate, border stamp and agent fees; worker transportation; and housing (Velandia et al., 2023).

In this publication, we present information about the use of the H-2A visa program among Tennessee nurseries. Specifically, we look at the changes in the program's use in the past seven years among these operations. Our goal is to better understand the use of the H-2A visa program among Tennessee nurseries as a strategy to overcome the labor challenges they face.

The H-2A Temporary Agricultural Worker Visa Program

The H-2A visa program is a program that allows U.S. agricultural employers experiencing a shortage of domestic workers to fill seasonal or temporary jobs with foreign non-immigrant workers. H-2A workers can only perform agricultural work that is seasonal or temporary in nature and that will not last more than one year (U.S. Department of Labor, 2025a). For more information about the H-2A visa program, refer to UT Extension Publication W1206 -The H-2A Visa Program in Tennessee: General Overview (Velandia et al., 2023).

Data

The U.S. Department of Labor makes selected information extracted from non-immigrant visa application tables within the Office of Foreign Labor Certification's case management systems, including H-2A visa program-related applications, available on their labor performance data website (U.S. Department of Labor, 2025b). These data sets, also known as disclosure data, provide public access to the latest quarterly and annual data. Each data set is cumulative for the fiscal year and contains unique records identified by the applicable Office of Foreign Labor Certification (OFLC) case number (U.S. Department of Labor, 2025b).

Disclosure data contains information about the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) code that employers of H-2A workers selected on their applications as the one that best represents their industry. We used H-2A visa program disclosure data to evaluate the use of the H-2A program among Tennessee nurseries. We first selected those operations that self-identified under the NAICS codes 1114, 11142 and 111421, which represent the greenhouse, nursery and floriculture production; nursery and floriculture production; and nursery and tree production industries, respectively. Then, we evaluated operations one by one using businesses' names. We looked at businesses' websites to examine the products and services they sell or provide. We selected those operations we confirmed were nurseries or had a segment of their businesses related to nursery crop production and marketing. We specifically looked at the number of H-2A workers requested by Tennessee nurseries and certified by the OFLC between federal fiscal years (FYs) 2017 and 2024.

Number of H-2A Workers Requested by Tennessee Nurseries Compared to Those Requested by All Tennessee Agricultural Employers

We first compared the use of the H-2A visa program among Tennessee nurseries to the overall use of the H-2A program among all Tennessee agricultural employers between FYs 2017 and 2024.

We looked at the number of temporary H-2A certified jobs in Tennessee. A certified job is a job that meets all the requirements of the H-2A visa program and that has been certified by the U.S. Department of Labor. A certified worker under the H-2A visa program is a worker who has been approved to work in a job that has been certified by the U.S. Department of Labor. For more information about the H-2A visa program certification process, refer to UT Extension Publication W1206 -The H-2A Visa Program in Tennessee: General Overview (Velandia et al., 2023).

Between FYs 2017 and 2024, the number of H-2A certified workers in Tennessee requested by all agricultural employers increased by 68 percent (see Figure 1). The number of certified workers increased at a lower rate (11 percent) between FYs 2021 and 2024 compared to FYs 2017 and 2020 (23 percent). In 2024, Tennessee experienced a decrease in the number of H-2A certified workers for the first time since FY 2017 (see Figure 1).

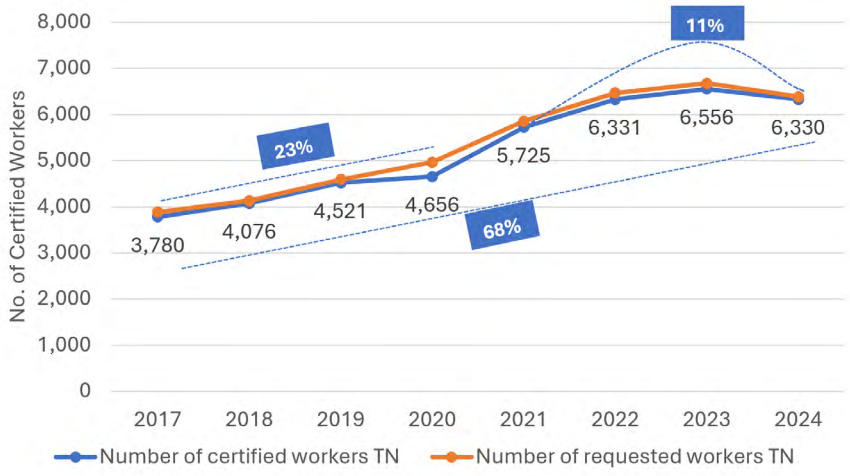

Figure 1: *Number of H-2A Requested and Certified Workers in Tennessee between FYs 2017 and 2024. Source: U.S. Department of Labor*

The number of requested workers closely aligned with the number of certified workers with a small deviation in FY 2020. While not all workers requested were certified, a large percentage of those requested were certified. On average, between FYs 2017 and 2024, 98 percent of the workers requested were certified.

The number of certified workers requested by Tennessee nurseries increased by 201 percent between FYs 2017 and 2024 (see Figure 2). Similar to the use of the H-2A program among all Tennessee agricultural employers (see Figure 1), the use of the program in terms of the number of H-2A certified workers among Tennessee nurseries increased at a higher rate between FYs 2017 and 2020 (125 percent) compared to FYs 2021 and 2024 (-5 percent). The number of H-2A certified workers had the highest increase between FYs 2020 and 2021 (40 percent) but decreased by 5 percent between FYs 2021 and 2024 (see Figure 2).

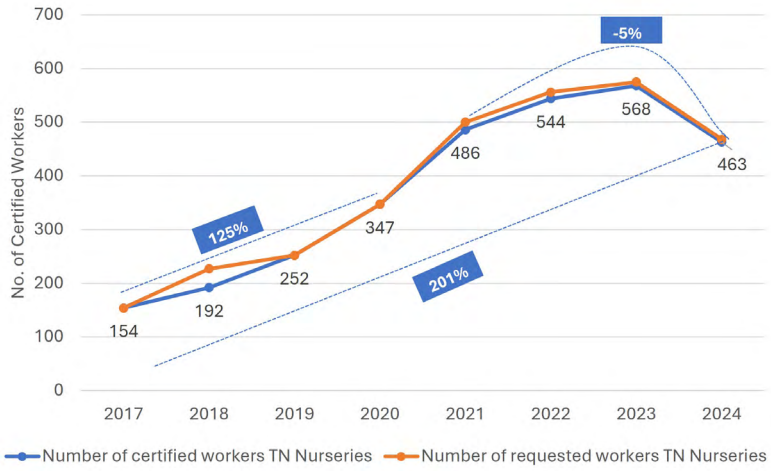

Figure 2: *Number of H-2A Requested and Certified Workers in Tennessee Nurseries between FYs 2017 and 2024. Source: U.S. Department of Labor*

Location of Tennessee Nurseries Using the H-2A Visa Program

In Figure 3, we present the number of H-2A certified workers requested by Tennessee nurseries, broken down by county, for FY 2024. The highest concentration of H-2A certified workers was in Middle Tennessee, specifically in Warren, DeKalb, Grundy and Franklin counties. Warren County had the highest concentration of H-2A certified workers with 195 H-2A certified workers. The concentration of requested and certified workers is consistent with the number of nurseries located in this county. Warren County has the highest number of licensed nurseries in the state[1] (Tennessee Department of Agriculture, Consumer & Industry Services, 2025).

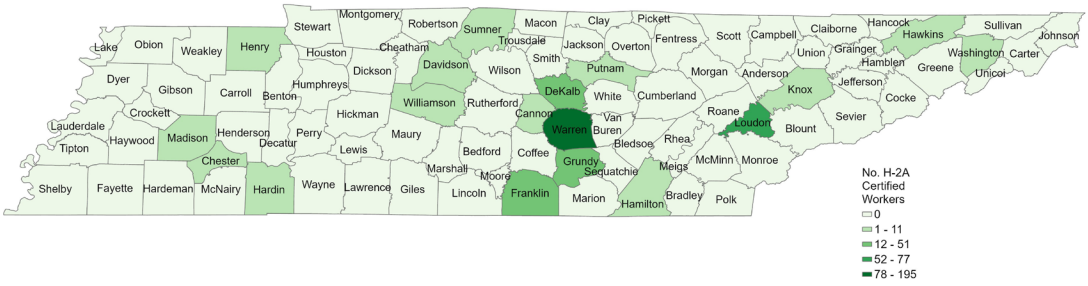

Figure 3: *Number of H-2A Certified Workers in Tennessee Nurseries by county in FY 2024. Source: U.S. Department of Labor*

Number of Tennessee Nurseries with H-2A Workers

As noted in Figure 4, although the number of Tennessee nurseries using the H-2A program increased at an annual rate between 14 percent and 50 percent between FYs 2017 and 2022, the number of Tennessee nurseries requesting H-2A workers decreased by 15 percent between FYs 2022 and 2024. The decrease in the number of Tennessee nurseries requesting H-2A workers may be related to the increased costs associated with using the program or other reasons yet to be fully understood. The Tennessee adverse effect wage rate, which is the minimum wage rate that employers of H-2A workers must pay these workers, has increased at an average annual rate of 4 percent since FY 2017 (see Figure 5).

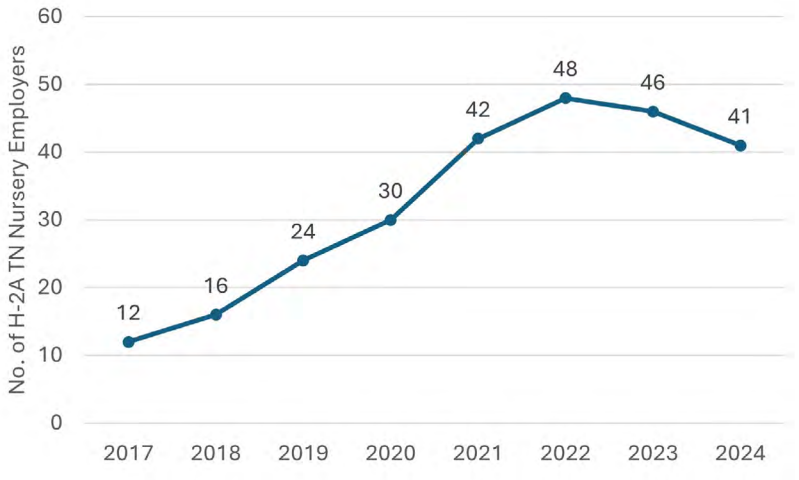

Figure 4: *Number of Tennessee Nurseries Requesting and Obtaining H-2A Certified Workers between FYs 2017 and 2024. Source: U.S. Department of Labor*

[1]In Tennessee, a nursery license is required for each location where a person grows or propagates nursery stock or annual plants for sale or distribution on a commercial basis (Tennessee Department of Agriculture, 2025).

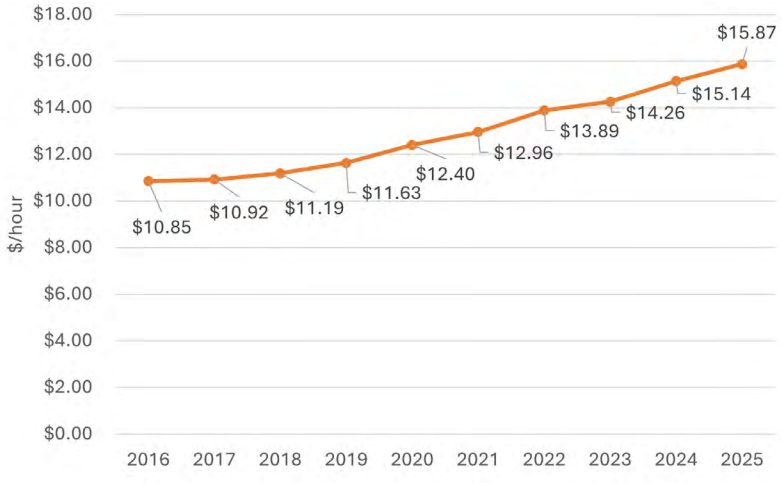

Figure 5: *Tennessee Adverse Effect Wage Rate between FYs 2017 and 2024. Source: U.S. Department of Labor*

Distribution of Tennessee Nurseries by Number of H-2A Certified Workers

When examining the distribution of nurseries by the number of H-2A certified workers by operation (see Figure 6), we can see that between FYs 2017 and 2019, an average of 48 percent of Tennessee nurseries using the H-2A program employed five H-2A certified workers or fewer. In FY 2020, that trend changed when close to half of the Tennessee nurseries using the H-2A program requested between six to 10 workers. In FY 2021, trends went back to levels prior to FY 2020 with the highest percentage of Tennessee nurseries having five or fewer H-2A certified workers in FYs 2021 and 2022. In FY 2024, we returned to FY 2020 trends with the highest percentage of Tennessee nurseries using the H-2A visa program to employ six to 10 H-2A certified workers.

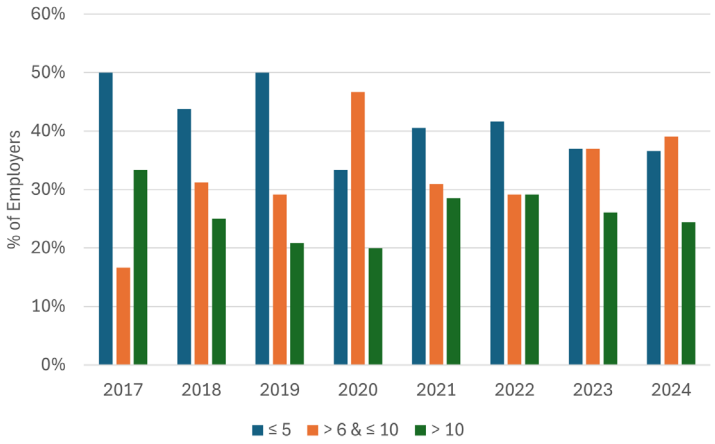

Figure 6: *Percentage of Nurseries by Number of H-2A Workers Certified between FYs 2017 and 2024. Source: U.S. Department of Labor*

Summary and Additional Resources

As described in this publication, the use of the H-2A visa program increased as a strategy to address labor challenges faced by Tennessee nurseries between FYs 2017 and 2024, peaking in FY 2023. After FY 2023, the number of operations using the H-2A program as a source of labor decreased but remained above FY 2020 levels. The upward trend may not have continued for a number of reasons: nurseries found other strategies to overcome labor challenges, such as automation and mechanization, or operators were forced to find other strategies given the increased costs of using the H-2A program, or for a suite of circumstances, priorities and decision-making that are yet to be fully understood.

For nurseries interested in using the H-2A visa program as a source of labor, refer to UT Extension Publication W1206 -The H-2A Visa Program in Tennessee: General Overview (Velandia et al., 2023). In Table 1, we show the top four businesses/firms in terms of H-2A certified jobs used by Tennessee nurseries to handle the H-2A job certification process in FY 2024.[2] Employers should conduct thorough research before engaging an attorney, agent or H-2A labor contractor to assist in completing the certification and hiring process for H-2A workers.

[2]The University of Tennessee does not endorse the businesses/firms presented in this publication.

Table 1. Agents or attorneys hired by Tennessee Nursery Operations with the highest number of H-2A certified jobs, FY 2024.

Law firm/Business	E-mail or Website	Phone Number	Certified Workers
Agriculture Workforce Management Association	h2a@awmalabor.com	(859) 233-7845	157
National Agricultural Consultants Inc	theresa@nach2a.com	(910) 947-7004	85
Mas Labor H2A, LLC	https://www.masslabor.com/agworks	(434) 263-4300	82
YOUNGBLOOD & ASSOCIATES, PLLC	H2@YOUNGBLOODASSOCIATES.COM	(931) 274-7811	82

Source: U.S. Department of Labor

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