

1990-2000: The Decade Oklahoma's Agricultural Jobs Vanished

The rise of corporate-industrial agriculture in Oklahoma coincided with the largest decline in the agricultural workforce in Oklahoma's history. 77% of farm and ranch jobs disappeared in Oklahoma from 1990 to 2014—greater than the decline in subsistence farming during the Dust Bowl.

SINCE 1990, the number of agricultural jobs in Oklahoma has declined by 77%, according to figures from the U.S. Census. This period of employment decline in the farming and ranching industry—once a pillar of the state's job market—coincides with the expansion of corporate-industrial agriculture, beginning with the legalization of corporate agriculture in 1969, and accelerating with the arrival of concentrated swine and poultry production in the early 1990s.

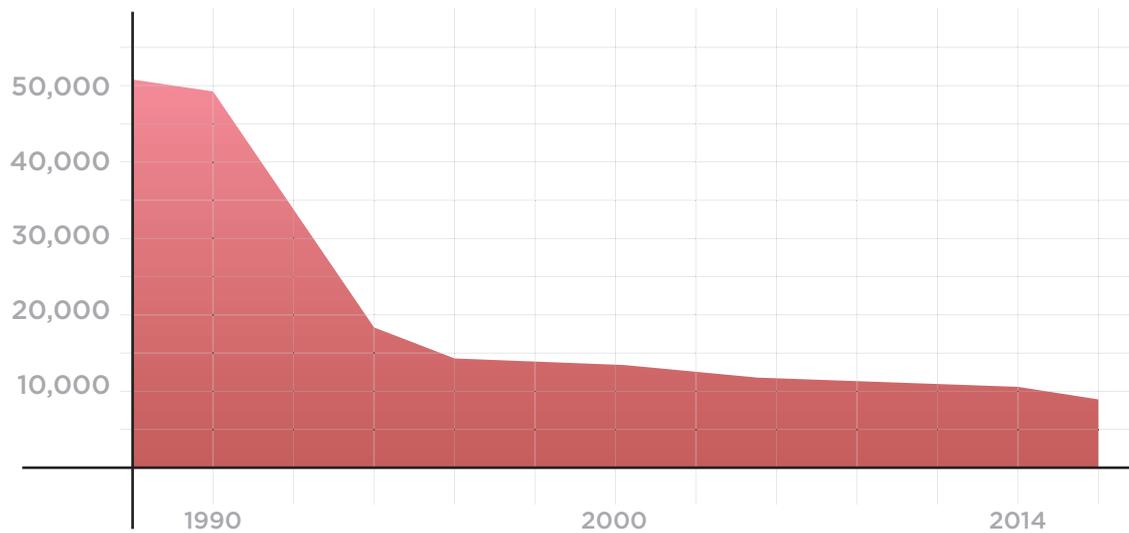
“Industrial agriculture means fewer jobs,” says Brian Ted Jones, Kirkpatrick Foundation director of education. “And that’s not surprising, because the whole point of industrialization is greater efficiency.”

Oklahoma is currently engaged in a serious debate about agriculture, as voters consider State Question 777, a controversial amendment to the state's constitution that



would provide the agriculture industry with a private right of action to challenge laws that restrict their technology and livestock production practices. Kirkpatrick Foundation is conducting non-partisan analysis and public education in a number of areas related to SQ777, including rural economies, environmental conservation, legal and constitutional ramifications, foreign ownership and investment, and animal welfare.

Steepest 10 Year Decline in Ag Jobs in Our State's History



“We believe the passage of State Question 777 would not improve job growth in the agricultural sector and could lead instead to more rapid decline,” says Louisa McCune, the foundation’s executive director.

This conclusion rests on a legal and factual analysis of SQ777’s probable consequences. Because the proposed amendment would give agricultural producers expanded litigation powers, only those producers with enough resources to afford protracted litigation could effectively exploit the amendment.

“Industrial agriculture would have deep enough pockets to take advantage of 777, and smaller, family farms wouldn’t. It’s that simple,” says Jones.

Between 1990 and 2000, the number of Oklahoma hired farm workers fell 72%, from 49,681 to 13,721. The trend continued through 2014, the most recent year for which census data is currently available, and a year when the number of Oklahoma agricultural jobs totaled 11,560.

“The decline in agricultural jobs between 1990 and 2014 is the steepest drop in farm and ranch work in Oklahoma history,” says Jones.

By comparison, the 1930 census reported the total number of tenant farmers and sharecroppers at 146,384. By 1940, after ten years of economic depression and ecological devastation, the total number of tenant farmers and sharecroppers had shrunk to 102,773—a contraction of 29.79%.

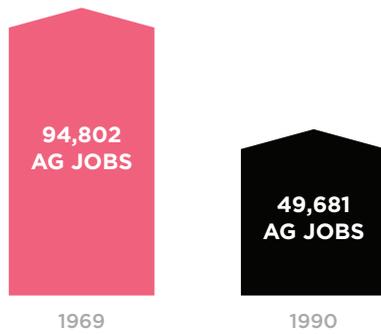
“Oklahoma lost a greater percentage of middle-class ag jobs in the last twenty-five years than we lost during the Dust Bowl,” says Jones.

This decline in the agricultural workforce coincides with the introduction and expansion of corporate-industrial farming in Oklahoma. From 1907 to 1969, Oklahoma operated under a consensus that the state’s constitution prohibited corporations from engaging in the agricultural trade.

“That changed in 1969, when the Supreme Court decided *LeForce v. Bullard*,” says Jones, “which held that the Constitution did not, in fact, prohibit corporations from engaging in the farm and ranch business. And that decision appears to have had a direct influence on the number of agricultural jobs.”

From 1935 to 1969, the number of hired ag workers rose from 31,444 to 86,874. Beginning in 1969—the

Oklahoma Ag Job Decline



same year *LeForce* was decided—those numbers began dropping steadily.

“To put this in perspective, from 1969 to 1990, Oklahoma lost 4.85 ag jobs a day,” says Jones. “Which is bad enough. But from 1990 to 2000, we lost 9.85 ag jobs a day.”

The rapid decline between 1990 and 2000 followed amendments to the state corporate farming code enacted in 1991, which allowed large-scale industrial swine and poultry production to do business in Oklahoma.

“At the time, state leaders believed the amendments would mean more employment in rural Oklahoma, where the job market was particularly depressed,” says Jones. “But in reality, the effect has been a dramatic reduction in the agricultural workforce overall, and a consolidation of the remaining jobs in a small number of places—primarily, as it turns out, the Oklahoma City and Tulsa labor markets, which have more industrial ag jobs today than anywhere else in the state.”

This conclusion rests on an analysis of data from the Oklahoma Employment Security Commission. Accord-

ing to the OESC, the four top locations for “food processing” jobs as of 2015 are Oklahoma City (1,910 jobs), Tulsa (1,720), Enid (980), and Poteau (850).

The decline in agricultural employment has not been the only observed effect of the 1991 corporate farming amendments. Over the same period of time, significant changes took hold in Oklahoma’s hog market.

“Three things happened to the Oklahoma hog industry after the 1991 amendments,” says Jones. “First, the number of hogs produced in the state skyrocketed—from 260,682 in 1992 to 2,304,749 in 2012. That’s an increase of 784% over two decades. In 2016 dollars, that’s going from a total value of 19.7 million to more than 174 million.

“But that dramatic increase in hog production coincided with two other trends,” Jones adds. “A sharp swing in consolidation of earnings and a massive decline in the number of hog farms statewide.”

In 1992, the top 0.35% of the state’s industry produced and sold 37% of the state’s hogs. By 2012, the top 1.69% of the state’s industry produced and sold 94% of the state’s hogs. During this same two-decade period, the total number of Oklahoma hog farms shrank by 43%.

“As a result of the change in the corporate farming laws,” Jones says, “there’s more money being made in the Oklahoma hog industry than ever before. But fewer Oklahomans are getting a share.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT STATE QUESTION 777, PLEASE VISIT OUR WEBSITE AT WWW.KIRKPATRICKFOUNDATION.COM AND CLICK ON THE KNOW BEFORE YOU VOTE SLIDER.



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