

In the Georgia case, dubbed Operation Blooming Onion, the working conditions were described as “modern-day slavery” as workers faced wage theft and physical abuse and were illegally transported; two died due to heat exposure. According to an indictment, 24 farm labor contractors and recruiters allegedly demanded workers pay illegal fees, held their identification documents hostage, required physically demanding work for little or no pay, and housed workers “in crowded, unsanitary, and degrading living conditions.” According to the indictment, workers were threatened with deportation and violence while the defendants profited \$200 million.

Currently, farmers and ranchers are able to resource the H-2A visa program if they need workers to perform seasonal or temporary agricultural labor so long as they can prove that they were not able to hire a domestic worker, among other requirements. While H-2B visas are considered “nonagricultural,” nurseries, meatpacking, and seafood processing plants use them across the country and including here in Iowa.

The demand for agricultural workforce visas has been steadily on the rise as producers face continued labor shortages, even before the pandemic. Most recently, the Labor Department noted the number of H-2A visas has more than tripled since 2012.