Changying “Charlie” Li, an associate professor at the University of Georgia College of Engineering specializing in sensor technology, is leading a four-year study focused on improving the efficiency of the nation’s blueberry harvest. Li and his colleagues at 10 universities across the nation received a $2.37 million grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture for the project.

The team hopes to develop a new, affordable “semi-mechanical” blueberry harvester, use sensor technology to identify plant varieties most suitable to mechanical harvesting, and use an electronic “berry” to analyze the bumpy path the fruit travels before reaching the produce aisle.

Li indicated the challenges to the industry include the increasingly high cost of labor, a shortage of workers and low harvest efficiency.

“Nearly all fresh market blueberries are harvested by hand, because machine harvesters damage the fruit too much and the quality is too low to be sold as fresh fruit in the supermarket or grocery store,” Li said.

The lower quality berries end up in processed foods such as blueberry bagels or blueberry pancake mix and often bring farmers half the price of the higher quality handpicked fruit.

The research team is designing a semi-mechanical harvester featuring a catch plate and conveyor system. A worker will ride along the machine, shaking the bushes, as the ripe berries fall onto an air-cushioned catch plate. The prototype should be ready by the end of the year.

The Choice Between Imported Labor and Imported Food

Michigan farmers have known for years that money is not always the answer to getting and keeping a migrant workforce. Housing is free, the United States offers health insurance, and many other free services are available. But even doubling the asparagus picker’s wages has not improved the retention of workers. “The state’s workforce development agency did a survey last year of Michigan’s asparagus growers, and their pickers’ average wage - working at piece rates - was more than $14 an hour,” said John Bakker, executive director of the Michigan Asparagus Advisory Board. “You would think people would be lined up to harvest the crop at almost double the minimum wage, but they’re not. We cannot entice domestic workers to do this job with money, and the pool of migrants is dwindling. I don’t think more money creates more migration.”

The situation is expected to improve as more migrants move north traditionally in the summer months, but asparagus farms still do not expect to see enough workers to fulfill their needs. At this time, farmers feel their only option is to go through the federal H2A program – the only federal agriculture visa through which workers are legally allowed to reside and work.

For more information: https://www.michfb.com/MI/Farm_News/Imported_labor_or_imported_food/#sthash.m1rb5A8g.dpuf

More Restrictions Hit California Water Supplies

The drought continues to worsen in California and the supplies are being drawn even tighter. Residents, agencies and government are all seeking ways to make the state’s water supply more reliable, but the effects are severe. “The water situation continues to become more critical for many California farms and ranches, as water supplies become more restricted,” California Farm Bureau Federation President Paul Wenger said, in announcing the organization’s support for legislation introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives at the end of June. “There’s no time to waste.”

The State Water Resources Control Board has issued a stream of curtailment orders to senior water right holders to stop diversions. “As supplies continue to decline through the summer, it’s expected more senior rights will be impacted by limited water availability,” the water board said in a statement announcing the latest round of cuts, adding that curtailments should be lifted in the fall by priority of right.

A combination of problems including court challenges, miscalculation of water temperatures that affects water transfer agreements, and a continued lack of rain means crop losses may reach $4.5 billion and lead to an additional 485,000 acres of fallow ground, according to the California Farm Water Coalition.

“Crops were planted with promises made for water deliveries,” Farm Bureau’s Merkley said, “but because of miscalculations, some crops with significant investment may not make it to harvest.”

“We need solutions to this crisis and assurances that we are taking steps to ensure future supply reliability,” Wenger said. “Californians and all Americans depend on the food and farm products grown in our state, and we all benefit from policies that add flexibility to California water management.”

Wenger said Farm Bureau supports efforts to give water managers more options for benefiting protected fish species while maximizing water supplies for human needs. He also expressed support for a provision in a proposed bill that would expedite federal studies of California water storage projects. “All of California suffers from the impacts of drought, and we hope our congressional representatives from both parties and all regions can work together to address the federal government’s role in easing the drought’s impacts,” Wenger said. “This bill is a good starting point.”

Permission for use granted by the California Farm Bureau Federation.

For more information: http://www.agalert.com/story/?id=8470
USDA Turkey Report Hints at Fewer Birds for Thanksgiving Meals

(AP) There may be fewer turkeys in the store this Thanksgiving, according to a recent U.S. Department of Agriculture's monthly turkey hatchery report. A decline in young turkeys placed on feed in May, combined with the worst-ever U.S. outbreak of avian influenza, means demand may outweigh supply and affect Americans’ holiday budgets.

National Turkey Federation spokesman Keith Williams offered some hope by noting that most shoppers buy turkeys that are frozen and those consumed this November were produced before the bird flu struck the upper Midwest.

USDA's May 22 Cold Storage Report showed there were 394.4 million pounds of turkey in cold storage during April 2015, up 5.2 percent from April 2014.

USDA Prepares for Possible Return of Bird Flu this Fall

U.S. Department of Agriculture veterinary officials are advocating increased surveillance, improved farm security and more money to prevent a return this fall of the disease that devastated chicken and turkey flocks.

Avian influenza has killed 48 million birds since early March, though the USDA says the virus has likely been eradicated now. The hardest hit states were Iowa, Minnesota and Nebraska.

Another outbreak could occur as the government believes waterfowl carried the virus and dropped it over Midwest-ern farms during the spring migration north. Though hotter, dryer weather kills the virus, scientists worry it could return with cooler fall weather and the southward migration.

Increased surveillance of wild birds to spot the virus will help and industry groups are working to establish improved biosecurity. Simple measures including controlling movement between barns, cleaning equipment more thoroughly, and training personnel on how the virus spreads, are expected to help slow any spread.

Work on a vaccine also continues, as well as discussion about creating an insurance program to compensate poultry farms in a way similar to how farmers are paid if crops fail due to drought or other natural disaster.

The peach harvest is underway and the forecast is down about eight percent, making it the smallest crop in over a decade. The dried plum (prune) crop is also down around four percent, with fruit size limited by a warm winter and early spring in California.

Likewise, the sweet cherry crop is forecast to be down around 11 percent. However, domestic shipments of sweet cherries were running significantly above volume levels reported the same time last year, sweetening the early prices. In other good news, warm weather this winter and spring accelerated the progress of melon crops and domestic shipments for the season were running ahead of last year’s. Grower prices for fresh pears hit a record high in April, along with gains in the lemon and orange markets.

Prices for pears are likely to hold strong through season’s end as the supplies lessen. Huge apple supplies, however, have driven down fresh apple grower prices. Smaller fruit size and increased incidence of fruit drop have kept Florida’s recent orange crop from reaching expected levels, holding production down from last season’s volume and driving up grower prices for Florida’s fresh and processed oranges. These resulting higher prices have held the U.S. all-orange grower price above a year ago since the start of the season.