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### Refugees an asset to state farms

By Rey Koslowski, Commentary  
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In 1950, an American farmer with "140 acres, 50 livestock, pigs, ducks, chickens and farm machinery" submitted an immigration visa application "Affidavit of Support" to sponsor my parents, who grew up on farms in Poland. On their arrival here, he gave them work and a place to live.

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The 1948 Displaced Persons Act made this possible by authorizing admission of 400,000 displaced persons from war-torn Europe between 1948 and 1952. It required that at least 30 percent "have been engaged in agricultural pursuits and ... will be employed in the United States in agricultural pursuits." The Act essentially recruited refugee farmers.

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Today, American farmers need workers experienced in milking cows, raising livestock, planting and picking fruits and vegetables. Many of the world's refugees, who are stranded in camps for years and cannot return to their countries, grew up in rural areas and are

experienced farmers.

President [Barack Obama](#) and [Congress](#) could increase the number of resettled refugees beyond the 70,000 ceiling and help American farmers in the process.

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In New York, the Greek-style yogurt boom is pushing up demand for milk, estimated by a [Cornell University](#) study to increase by 15 percent within five years and require 100,000 more cows and 2,225 workers. Problem is New York lost half of its dairy farmers between 1990 and

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2010, as the average age of farmers is increasing and fewer of their children stay in farming.

Immigrants have been filling labor demands — the National Milk Producers Federation estimates that 41 percent of overall dairy labor is now foreign-born. Given that the H2-A temporary agriculture worker visa fits seasonal labor demand, but cows need to be milked every day of the year, many dairy farmers have turned to hiring unauthorized migrants rather than cut herd size or abandon dairy altogether.

New refugee resettlement programs could help meet agricultural labor demand legally by pairing refugees with farmers. Farmers could sponsor refugees after reviewing their farming experience and conducting Skype interviews to discuss work expectations, salary and housing. Refugees could begin working on farms part-time while taking video-conferenced English as a Second Language courses. Initial housing costs would be covered by federal financial assistance provided to all refugees.

After six months, farmers would offer full-time employment at the minimum wage plus free housing. After one year, farmers would also provide garden plots, in which refugees could grow produce to eat or sell at local farmers markets. Refugees who grow and sell their own produce may eventually take advantage of one of the projects funded by the [U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement](#) that help refugees become self-employed farmers themselves.

Resettlement programs pairing refugees with New York dairy farmers could take advantage of the state's Office for New Americans, which helps immigrants with English and civics classes, naturalization applications and job training. The office also promotes programs like the "Refugee Milker Training Pilot Program," preparing Bhutanese refugees to work on large dairy farms in Covington in Wyoming County and Linwood in Livingston County, and a project training Burmese refugees for agricultural work in the Ithaca area. One could also envision [SUNY](#) agricultural programs developing farming boot camps for refugees in collaboration with SUNY-sponsored interpreters.

To give some refugee farmers the chance that my parents had, Sens. [Charles Schumer](#) and [Kirsten Gillibrand](#) could team up with U.S. representatives from New York's dairy producing regions — [Chris Gibson](#), [Elise Stefanik](#), [Richard Hanna](#), [Tom Reed](#), John Katko and [Chris Collins](#) — and propose legislation that adds several thousand additional refugee resettlement slots for refugees with agricultural experience.

*Rey Koslowski is associate professor of political science at the University at Albany.*

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