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Dairy farms are vulnerable to Trump's mass deportation threats. The industry hopes to get a pass

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May 19, 2025, 6 a.m. · 6
min read



Ramón uses a shovel to push compost into a bag with help from other workers Monday, March 24, 2025, at Rosenholm Dairy in Cochrane, Wisconsin. (Angela Major/Wisconsin Public Radio)

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Once a week on a dairy farm in western Wisconsin, there's a class to help workers from Mexico learn English. Gathered in a small kitchenette next to the milking parlor, the students work on a lesson about things they are proud of.

"I am proud of myself because I am saving money for building a house in Mexico," said Kevin, who came to Wisconsin about five years ago, arriving from Mexico in the January cold. WPR is only using workers' first names because of their immigration statuses.

Kevin says he never feared being deported before the 2024 election. But now, he said, things have changed.



Kevin, left, and Ramón, right, participate in an English lesson with Mercedes Falk on Monday, March 24, 2025, at Rosenholm Dairy in Cochrane, Wisconsin. (Angela Major/Wisconsin Public Radio)

On the campaign trail, President Donald Trump promised "mass deportations." It's been a big concern for industries like dairy that rely on the labor of workers without legal immigration status.

Now, a few months into the new administration, the immigration rhetoric is still intense. There have been many high-profile deportations.

Still, many dairy workers in states like Wisconsin are carrying on with their work, as those enforcement efforts have mostly been focused elsewhere.

'We think it's rhetoric'

Kevin isn't scared, he said, just worried, mostly about the possibility of being treated badly by immigration authorities. But he hasn't changed his day-to-day behavior at all.

For the dairy industry, that's good. The National Milk Producers Federation **estimates** immigrants make up 51% of the industry's workforce, and the farms that rely on them produce 79% of U.S. milk.

Farm owner John Rosenow said Kevin reflects how many dairy workers feel about the new Trump administration.

"They're basing everything off of last time," he said. "[Trump] said the same thing last time, and then nothing happened. And so people aren't going home. They're staying and they're working and going about their daily lives."



John Rosenow, owner of Rosenholm Dairy, on Monday, March 24, 2025, in Cochrane, Wisconsin. (Angela Major/Wisconsin Public Radio)

The majority of the workers who keep Rosenow's farm running are from Mexico. He's hopeful the **more than \$50 billion** the dairy industry contributes to Wisconsin's economy each year will protect dairy workers from being deported.

"It just doesn't make sense that the federal government would ruin an industry by being overzealous on immigration. And we think it's rhetoric," he said.

But other producers are more worried about how the industry's workforce will react to the growing number of deportations.

Doug Chapin is a dairy farmer in central Michigan and chair of the Michigan Milk Producers Association board. He recently had an employee leave his farm in order to return to his home country.

"He said he thought now was a good time," Chapin said. "His family was there and so he chose to go back. And I think some of it dealt with the current immigration pressures."

Chapin said there is some optimism that the focus on immigration by the Trump administration could lead to reforms. He said the dairy industry has been asking lawmakers for two decades to update the process for farm workers. The current system primarily uses seasonal visas, which doesn't work for milking cows year-round.

The farm community has largely supported Trump, which Chapin said may mean the president is more willing to endorse a new immigration pathway.

"My hope is that we can avoid the loss of employees, ICE on farms, and that we have an opportunity to put a resolution in before we get there," he said.



Rosenholm Dairy on Monday, March 24, 2025, in Cochrane, Wisconsin. (Angela Major/Wisconsin Public Radio)

Future of immigration reform, enforcement uncertain

Earlier this month, President Donald Trump suggested his administration would work with farmers to provide legal status for their employees.

According to **reporting by Reuters**, the president said during an April 10 Cabinet meeting that producers would be able to vouch for their workers who are undocumented, potentially slowing down the deportation process and "ultimately bring them back" with legal status. Reuters reported the White House and the Department of Agriculture did not respond to requests to clarify the policy.

Julia Gelatt, associate director of the U.S. program at the Migration Policy Institute, said the process that Trump alluded to would take an act of Congress to achieve. Current law requires anyone who spends more than a year in the U.S. without legal status to wait 10 years before re-entering the country legally.

"It sounds a bit to me like a stretch to expect Congress to create this pathway over the next couple of years, although if President Trump

really continued to endorse it, that could really create a new political opening that we hadn't seen for visa reform," she said.

ICE has already made arrests on dairy farms under the Trump administration, including **in northern New York** in March and **in Vermont** in April. Yet many of the highest-profile immigration actions have been more politically-motivated, like **student visa holders** who have been arrested and detained after participating in protests.



Hills can be seen in the distance at Rosenholm Dairy on Monday, March 24, 2025, in Cochrane, Wisconsin. (Angela Major/Wisconsin Public Radio)

Gelatt said there are several outstanding legal questions surrounding the tactics the Trump administration is using. That includes the use of **old, little-used laws** as justification for deportations.

"How those court cases proceed could determine the course of some of those activities," she said.

It could also shape whether the administration pursues more sweeping deportations. There have been more deportations so far than during the first Trump administration, Gelatt said, but fewer than the first years under President Obama, pointing out that most arrests happen when local jails turn people over to Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Still, Gelatt suspects the Trump administration is planning more workplace raids at some point. Other industries, like meat packing, have been more frequent targets of these actions in the past.

“Those take some time to prepare,” she said. “Often there’s a lot of investigation that happens before the actual arrests happen. So those may be in the works.”



Kevin, left, and Ramón, right, participate in an English lesson with Mercedes Falk on Monday, March 24, 2025, at Rosenholm Dairy in Cochrane, Wisconsin. (Angela Major/Wisconsin Public Radio)

Work on the farm continues

While all that plays out, the cows on Rosenow’s farm still have to be milked and cared for — day in, and day out.

Ramón has been working on the farm for about two years. Like many dairy workers in the area, his wife and kids are back in Mexico. So unlike **some people in the country without legal status**, he’s not worried about the prospect of being separated from his family.

In fact, his main concern about being deported isn’t for himself at all — it’s for the farm. If all the workers were sent back to Mexico, he said, the consequences would be devastating.

"No más dinero, no más leche," he said. "No more money, no more milk."

This story first appeared on Wisconsin Public Radio. This version was produced in partnership with **Harvest Public Media**, a collaboration of public media newsrooms in the Midwest. It reports on food systems, agriculture and rural issues.

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