

California Shepherders and Goat Herders: SB 143 Study

March 30, 2026

SB 143 (Budget Committee, 2023) required the Department of Industrial Relations (DIR) to prepare a report for the Legislature that summarizes consultations with a wide range of stakeholders in the sheep and goat industry, assesses federal and state labor law violation data in the industry, interviews herders and summarizes herder demographics, and presents stakeholder perspectives on why H-2A herders are hired in the California sheep and goat industry.

Both ranchers and worker advocates provided recommendations:

- Ranchers want to reduce the alternative minimum monthly wage of \$4,938 in 2026
- Worker advocates want increased enforcement of labor laws and no exemption from overtime wages for range herders who are on duty 24/7.

Federal and state enforcement agencies find few violations of labor laws. Ranchers say they comply with labor laws and regulations, while worker advocates say that H-2A herders are vulnerable to losing their jobs if they complain.

H-2A herders are mostly Peruvian and Mexican men in their 40s and often related to their co-workers and supervisors. None of those interviewed reported paying recruitment or visa fees, all reported that they received the appropriate wage and had their passports, and all preferred to work in California rather than other states due to California's higher-than-federal wage and more urban environment.

Ranchers say they need H-2A herders because US workers do not want herding jobs and lack the experience to herd sheep and goats. Worker advocates say that ranchers prefer to employ H-2A herders who are dependent on their employers.

The alternative minimum monthly wage for range goat herders is due to expire July 1, 2026. All stakeholders agreed that the minimum monthly wage should be the same for sheep and goat herders because the workers and work involved in herding sheep and goats are similar and often overlap.

The sheep and goat industry is segmenting into (1) a shrinking meat and wool industry that struggles to compete with low-cost imported lamb and (2) an expanding vegetation management sector that pays ranchers to provide animals to consume grass and brush in orchards, vineyards, solar farms, parks, and other places in the urban-wildland interface to reduce fuel loads (also known as "targeted grazing"). There is no definitive data on the share of the state's 500,000 sheep and 125,000 goats involved in targeted grazing, but stakeholders agree that at least 20 percent of the state's sheep and goats are used in targeted grazing and the percentage is rising.

California's minimum monthly wage for range herders is about 2.5x the federal minimum monthly wage. Two other states, Colorado and Oregon, have minimum monthly wages for range herders that are about 10 percent higher than the federal minimum monthly wage. Ranchers say that high labor costs are driving them from the state; worker advocates say that range herders deserve the California minimum monthly wage due to their isolation and vulnerability.