



Regional Food Infrastructure Network

Develop a business plan that links farms, businesses and consumers in the production, processing, distribution, marketing and purchasing of value-added products in the 19 counties of Western PA.

Labor Part One: Non-local

by Suzy Meyer

Of all infrastructure issues, dedicated, applied, experienced human capital to produce vegetables, fruit, grains, grasses, milk, and meat products is the most challenging and most limiting factor in cranking up the supply to meet the growing demand for local food.

This issue starts with an historical account of farm labor, establishes the need for non-local labor when local labor is not available; reviews policy venues for hiring temporary workers, and shares stories from two successful farms, touching upon their experiences with Hispanic workers.

1967 USDA Farm Report - November 9 for the week of October 22-28

Labor

“Sorghum harvest made good progress in most areas. Harvesting of peanuts moved along well. Tobacco marketing and stripping continued.

Sugar beet harvest was well along in most areas. Sugar cane harvest was one-fifth complete in Louisiana and about to begin in Florida. Combining of rice was nearly complete in Arkansas. The second cutting in Texas was nearly three-fourths harvested. Broomcorn harvest continued active in New Mexico. Sunflower harvest progressed in North Dakota.

Apple picking neared completion in most areas. Grape harvest continued in California and parts of the northeast. Picking of citrus continued to incre-

ase in Florida. Fruit and nut harvests in California were moving along....”

Weather Conditions, Same Week

“Violent storms, heavy snow, and cold temperatures characterized the weather during the survey week. Tornadoes occurred in seven States from Missouri to Ohio, and in TN, MS, and AL. The Gulfport area of Mississippi suffered extensive property damage. The first major snow of the season hit the northern Great Plains and the Great Lakes region.....”

It takes a remarkably flexible work force to do that kind of labor in fair or inclement weather. It was as true forty years ago, as it is today.

In 1967, the nation’s labor force totaled 5,527,000 workers in October 22-28, a record low. Mechanization is cited as a significant factor. Farm family members who worked during the survey week

totalled 4,121,000 persons, 5 percent less than the previous year. Hired workers numbered 1,406,000.

Forty years later, the 2006 Farm Report registers the number of hired workers at 1,077,000. Farm family members are no longer broken out on the statistics.

Total Farm Labor PA, MD, DE, NJ:

1967: 75,000

2006: 42,000

PA Farm Labor 1967

Family

Workers: 136,000

Hired: 30,000

One can safely say that today, much if not most agricultural activities on commercially viable small and large farms in Western Pennsylvania are done by seasonal, hired help. And where there is a shortage of labor, production is cut back.

Non-local Labor

Joan Norman One Straw Farm

This year Joan and Drew Norman are bringing in 11 Hispanic workers to work their 200-acre organic vegetable farm, the largest in Maryland. "We need Mexicans", was the first thing she said when we started talking. This is the third year for One Straw to be hiring Hispanic workers through the government's H2A program, which allows temporary work permits for up to 10 months each year.

They travel 3,000 miles to make money. What would I do feed my two kids?

Anything.

- Joan Norman,
One Straw Farm

Another requirement is access to medical services, and three meals a day. This crew gets all the organic vegetables they can eat.

On average, One Straw pays them \$8.29/hour, no taxes withheld. Her crew is expanding, with the help of Miguel, now in his 5th year with One Straw, he is in charge of signing on new recruits from in and around his town in Mexico. All 11 workers are friends, or related through extended families. This, she says, makes a significant difference in how they work together on the farm.

Joan is certain of one thing: the hired workers that she brings in for seven months of the year, plan to go home. "They all want to go home. They don't want green cards, they want temporary work. They want to go back home. In fact, my guys want to be back by November 15 when there's a celebration in their town."

Certain issues make or break an employer's success and experience with non-local labor, or even local labor for that matter, and if they handle it right, their workers tend to come back year after year.

Issues of trust among workers who live and work closely together is important in creating a productive and stable environment. Where there is little trust, workers have been known to bury their money or stash it in a slit in their mattress, and they feel like they have to constantly watch their back.

Of course it helps if the employer or farm manager speak Spanish, but Joan does not, nor does her husband. This has a lot to do with the cultural barrier so often mentioned on this topic. [Penn State Extension now offers a 13-week Spanish instruction course for farm owners and managers to improve morale, productivity and profitability. For more info: <http://paimpact.cas.psu.edu/agr21.html>]

Out of 47,686 H2A visas that were issued by the U.S. Department of Labor in 2001, over 10,000 of these were certified for workers in North Carolina. In fact, H2A workers now make up an estimated 10% of all migrant and seasonal farmworkers in the state. The vast majority of these workers are employed by one employer, the North Carolina Growers Association.

-from Legal Aid, Inc.
<http://www.legalaidnc.org/programs/fwu/ncfarh2a.htm>

The Normans work to overcome the isolation that non-local workers may experience. They provide a truck for trips into York, PA, 30 miles away that has a growing worker population. And once a growing season, Joan and Drew collaborate with nearby orchards and farms with Hispanic workers, and invite everyone to a party at their farm.

Is the process easy? Is the government process fair, efficient, reliable or transparent? A resounding “No!” from Joan. “Four guys were scheduled to cross on March 29. They just got here last Saturday [April 21]. They [US government] stopped taking appointments because they’re so far behind.”

The H2A program, also known as “AgJobs” is considered old legislation. It is currently bogged down in processing requests for workers because the demand is so high. It’s a tedious drawn out process, one that requires an employer to fill out reams of paperwork, demonstrate adequate facilities, and exercise diligence to make sure the workers cross the border in a timely manner. And an employer has to demonstrate that “there are not sufficient workers who are able, willing, qualified, and available and that the hiring of a temporary foreign worker will have no adverse effect on the wages or working conditions of similarly employed US workers.” (US Citizenship & Immigration Services, formerly, INS Immigration & Naturalization Services)

I’ve tried everything [to hire local help], gone to colleges, put up flyers, advertise in newspapers, you name it...

Farming is a legitimate profession.

- Don Kretschmann, Kretschmann Farm

It is important to note that the H2A program is only good for temporary workers. They can stay for a maximum of 10 months any given year, then must return home. H2A is not suited for dairy and other

agriculture operations that need year-round workers.

The I-9 Form

One means of hiring legal agricultural workers in the country is through the Employment Eligibility Verification Form, known as the I-9 form, where an employer or labor contractor requests that a legal agricultural worker supply appropriate documentation to be eligible to work. It is administered through the Department of Justice, and follows the Fair Labor Standards Act, a federal law which sets minimum wage, overtime, recordkeeping, and child labor standards. To be eligible a worker must show documentation that establishes identity and employment eligibility.

There is a list of acceptable documents, out of which only two are needed. They include, but are not limited to: Certificate of US Citizenship, Certificate of Naturalization, an unexpired foreign passport, voter’s registration, Permanent Resident card, or Alien Registration Receipt Card with photograph. I-9 Form information is available at: <http://www.uscis.gov/files/form/i-9.pdf>

Pennsylvania’s Hispanic population has grown by 70 percent and its Asian population by 60 percent since 1990.

Hispanic workers are now the primary source of labor on dairy farms nationally and in the state.

-from PA Impact

<http://paimpact.cas.psu.edu/agr21.html>

Green Card

Finally, an agricultural worker can apply to the US Diversity Immigrant Visa Lottery Program (Green Card Lottery). Each year 55,000 permanent residence visas are selected through a computer-generated process. In 2006, 10 million people applied. A person with a Green Card can neither vote nor hold certain government jobs. And a winner’s spouse and children under 21 are also eligible for Green Cards.

continued

Now for farmer that has used Hispanic labor for almost 20 years, and continues at the same time to secure local farm workers...

Don Kretschmann Kretschmann Farms

Don farms 80 acres of organic vegetables and fruit. He needs year-round help to maintain his CSA operation, one of the biggest and most successful in the country. He was one of the first farmers in Western Pennsylvania to hire Mexican labor. "At first everybody was asking me questions." He has one Mexican laborer with a Green Card who's been with him for 18 years. His secret? "We hit it off. I guaranteed him as much work as he wants." He's got a retirement savings and a health plan that Don contributes to. His laborer recently brought a friend with him to work the farm that's located 45 minutes north of Pittsburgh. Kretschmann Farm also currently hires six local farm workers. He pays in the range of \$9 to \$17/hr.

Years ago he did try to hire Hispanic help, by going to a labor contractor. Don sent him \$600. No one showed up. It was a rip off. Though there are labor brokers in Pennsylvania, (and most are probably reputable), most farmers seek and hire workers through word of mouth--talking to other farmers.

I asked him why local labor is so hard for farmers to find, is it because the work is hard? "Yes, it's that, and it's part mechanization, part loss of farms (and farm families), and part farmers discouraging kids from working on farms."

For a farmer to hire non-local labor, they have to demonstrate that local labor is not available. Over the years, Don has put out many flyers, on college campuses and in classrooms, he's advertised in journals and newspapers, and does so with intent and humour. Here's one of his advertisements from 2002:

Great opportunity for several hard-working individuals with agricultural interests. Small and highly diversified certified organic 80-acre vegetable and fruit farm of 30 years, near Pittsburgh, PA. Large number of subscribers (CSA) plus greenhouse and wholesale market keep us (plus 2-4 Mexican workers) busy from February through December. Crops range from nearly any vegetable to apples, and fresh herbs.

Farm production experience desired, but more important is motivation, versatility and creativity. Great imitable opportunity to learn how to farm profitably. Computer literacy, mechanic and welding skills, Spanish-speaking all pluses. Salary/benefits dependent on experience and commitment.

Basic, no-shortcuts, "farmer's footsteps are the best fertilizer", pay-as-you-go, simpler is better, "don't put all your eggs in one basket"--farming method. We are committed to sustainable organics, regionalism, reasonable consumer pricing, efficiency, and professionalism.

-Get a peek at our farm at

<http://users.stargate.net/~kmann>

-Would like to settle on crew soon.

We recognize that every farm is different in its needs for growing food and growing a business. There certainly is no one-size-fits-all solution. And the game is always changing....

New federal immigrant labor laws will be unveiled very soon. Everyone on both sides of the border is hoping for a better, more efficient, streamlined and equitable system. The above information is current at the time of writing, though it may change soon.

Next Issue:

Labor Part Two: Solutions & Examples

We'll look at regional, state, and federal initiatives and applied solutions such as young farmer training, interships, apprenticeship, and succession planning, that are geared for meeting the demand for capable labor and informed new farmers.