



## 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.*

### Agriculture Labor: Part Two Hire Fresh Hire Local?

by Suzy Meyer

**"My personal** experience is that labor is always an issue, and always will be."

– Dr. MeeCee Baker, PDA, Director of Agriculture Education; Penn State University adjunct professor

**"We** are always going to need workers."

– Jeff Grove, Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, Local Affairs Director and Agriculture Labor Specialist

**"You** won't get people to do those jobs [semi-skilled labor] even if they get \$10-12 / hour. It's not like it used to be when in the summer all the [farm] kids at school worked at one time or another over at the Weaver Chicken plant. Now with child labor laws, they can't drive a tractor, for instance. They don't grow up learning to work on the farm like they used to."

– Al Wenger, Agribusiness Program Coordinator, Harrisburg Community College

**"The** hours and outdoor conditions make it tough. Better wages are part of the solution."

– Cheryl Cook, Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, Deputy Secretary of Marketing and Economic Development

**"Wage** is not the answer. Some of our farmers are paying \$12-18 / hour with additional benefits. Mechanization is not the answer. The problem is the job itself, look at the conditions: working seasonally and outside versus in air conditioning and year round. It's a cultural thing."

– Jeff Grove, Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, Local Affairs Director and Agriculture Labor Specialist

**"[Local** labor] is hit or miss, not steady. It's very difficult to assess someone. We get a wide response from PhDs to truck drivers...Nobody knows what farm labor means, they all have different expectations...there's a real lack of agricultural training."

– Don Kretschmann, Kretschmann Farms

**"I**nterns are a lot different from hourly workers, many are really smart, talented, and show initiative, but that doesn't mean they follow directions well. If they try their own technique on a task, they get the learning experience and I get the decreased productivity, again and again."

– Sam Cantrell, Maysie's Farm Conservation Center

**"We've** been challenged to establish a nuclear work force."

– Evan Verbanic, Cherry Valley Organics

**"This** is a lifestyle, not a job."

– Joan Norman, One Straw Farm

*Out of the diversity of experienced, professional agriculture voices, comes a resounding theme: the issue of labor in agriculture is not one issue, but is a myriad of issues. Some say that consolidation and mechanization have marginalized small farms. Some say its Western Pennsylvania's intensive hills and dales that constrain a globally competitive advantage. Others see a lack of work ethic in young people, or point to society's disconnect between food and farming, or the availability of cheap food from Wal-Mart. Oft repeated is the need for better agribusiness planning and management. And, it's all true.*

*Let's face it: when it comes to agricultural labor, it's hard work that most people today don't subscribe to--physical labor, work ethic, and associated responsibilities. Young people don't know how to farm, or don't know how to enter into it as an enterprise. An intern or hired help typically doesn't feel vested in the process--economically or intellectually--especially on someone else's land.*

*We do know that there is a very high demand for legal, seasonal immigrant labor nationwide and the federally allowed flow of workers is processed at a snail's pace. They often arrive late (no fault of their own) and work amidst uncomfortable barriers of language and culture. They are for the most part experienced agriculture laborers: they operate and repair machinery, know the difference between ripeness and grade quality, bring crops in from the field, and prefer to work long hours. Plus, surveys show that most want to return home after the harvest. But that's another story....*

*So the question is this: if we don't have enough immigrant labor to cultivate, harvest, and process food, and if mechanization is inappropriate topographically or in certain ag sectors, and if young people don't want to work on farms, or new entry farmers lack training or capital, and if the demand for local food is beginning to outstrip supply, then does agriculture labor exist? Yes and No. And if it does exist, where does it come from? It seems to be randomly in the making, and comes from disparate sources.*

*When it comes to in-the-field labor, it is hard to find. Period. The lack of it constrains farm size, production capacity, and succession. The consequences of farm labor shortages call for thinking differently--on many levels. This issue features stories of how successful farmers and ag professionals are planning to train future farmers, preserve land for them, and equip a new*

*generation with the skills necessary for a new era of optimized production capacity, and profitable, rewarding livelihoods on small farms.*

## Apprentices, Land, Community

### Evan and Jodi Verbanic Cherry Valley Organics Washington County

In March 2007, Justin responded to Cherry Valley Organics's ad in the paper: "Responsibilities include the planting, maintaining, harvesting, handling, and packaging of greens and herbs for sale to [CSA] subscribers, restaurants, and specialty food stores.... a 30-hour-per-week, seasonal, hourly position from early March until late November....2 seasons of organic vegetable production or similar horticultural experience is required. The hourly rate will be based upon the level of experience. Please note that this is not an apprentice-level position." Eleven other people also responded, none had applied agricultural experience.

Jodi and Evan Verbanic, owners of Cherry Valley Organics, with six years into growing a successful business, have also grown into this idea: build the human capital (labor) that is so intertwined with small farm agriculture, infuse it with social equity (vested interest, responsibility, future ownership) and facilitate a trained apprentice's transition into a new farm, one that could operate within the business plan of Cherry Valley Organics, or as a stand alone operation. To this end, they are on the threshold of hosting apprentice training at their farm, offer-

**My challenge to people who start new farmers' markets, or CSA programs:**

**What are you doing, dollar for dollar, hour for hour, to increase [food] production on the front end?**

- Evan Verbanic  
Cherry Valley Organics

ing would-be farmers 2-3 years of focused organic production and exposure to successful business skills including planning and marketing strategies.

**I would definitely hire someone who went through the Introductory Horticulture class at CCAC. They get a good overview. I can tell Justin what to do and he understands.**

- Jodi Verbanic  
Cherry Valley Organics

Evan wasn't kidding when he chuckled and said, "Hire Fresh Hire Local." The Verbanics employ four people. One, Justin, is an apprentice, he has previous garden maintenance experience and one semester of horticulture training at Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) under his belt. He's on the grower

track and looking forward to his future.

This model develops human capital and anticipates the need for natural capital. Jodi and Evan's plan is to carve out several acres, possibly on a lease-to-own basis for their apprentices (young or mid-career) and give them that leg up. What's troubling, however, is the larger picture of land use, namely how good arable land is being used for bad development. "First," Evan says, "we need to save the land and have it available for farming to meet the growing demands for local food." The Verbanics want to stop the loss of arable lands (using land trust models), invest in the bioregion, and integrate small farms into each municipality, at a scale close to home, and into the very weft and weave of each community.

Many obstacles face new farmers, the cost of land is just one. Additional startup costs can range between \$75,000 to \$100,000. That particular hurdle, is one that deperately needs to be addressed, possibly through creative public-private partnerships.

Is all this training and land and infrastructure investment economically sustainable? Evan points to the scrub-shrub fields of their new-to-them farm, their

future incubator farm sites, "I can guarantee that everything that will be grown on these sites, vegetables, herbs, or flowers - will be sold before it's harvested."

At the end of a work day Justin delivers cut flowers to East End Food Co-op, a 33-mile drive from the farm. "That's as far as we go anymore," Evan says, "all our other sales are within 18 miles of the farm."

### **Joan and Drew Norman One Straw Farm Hartford County, MD**

Joan and Drew Norman, operate the largest organic farm in Maryland and work under a smart and responsive business plan. They too want to start an apprentice program, one that offers 3-5 years of focused production with the promise of land for new start up farmers. "He or she could use our tractors, coolers, equipment, whatever they need to get going." David, who currently works with them is considering trying pastured poultry with an outlay of \$3,000. Joan thinks that's enough money to get started with fencing, cages, and breeding stock. She exudes encouragement, "I tell him to try lots of things, but try to think it through, see if it works...and if it doesn't work, then try something else."

She promotes a promising and profitable future for would-be farmers. Following the Norman's example would be a great start. "I want a 2,000 person CSA. We currently have 615." To achieve this, they are studying, rather John Hopkins University is studying for them, new community-based distribution models, CSA drop-offs at churches (all denominations) and a university. All of this within their new delivery range: less than 50 miles. "With our churches, we don't have to

**One Straw Farm is held in trust and can never be developed. When they sold the development rights 20 years ago, they received much needed cash to plow into the fledgling farm.**

drive that far [into Baltimore] anymore.”

**J**oan has thought a lot about community supported agriculture. Her approach may or may not be new, but it is compelling: “I was asked to speak to people about organic and local foods. I got a question about what they could do to start a CSA. There were 20 of them and I said, ‘You go out there and get 100 more people, find a farmer and tell him that you’ll pay him [good money] to grow food for you, right in the vicinity of his farm and near you neighborhoods. And if you want it to be organic, then pay him to do that and make that transition.’” She challenged these people to find a farmer willing to grow food for them and build an enduring, beneficial relationship.

(One Straw was a feature story in the March-April 2007 RFIN Newsletter on Non-local Labor. They hire seasonal Hispanic laborers through the government’s H2A program).

**Jack and Dale Duff  
Jen Montgomery and Greg Boulos  
Blackberry Meadows  
Allegheny County**

**J**en Montgomery, has eight years of organic agriculture experience, she graduated from Slippery Rock’s

**It’s kind of hard working for another person, seeing your own labor going into someone else’s farm... and you can’t afford to buy land.**

- Jen Montgomery  
Co-leasor, farm manager,  
Blackberry Meadows

Master in Sustainability program, interned with Don Kretschmann for a growing season, and managed the Slippery Rock farmers’ market. She then operated a 40-person CSA. Her husband, Greg Boulos, helps on the farm, and works for Steel City

Biofuels and consults on green design projects.

**J**en and Greg with two others—Heath Gamache, an environmental educator, and David Boulos, a computer technician—are leasing Blackberry Meadows from Jack and Dale Duff. It’s an 85-acre farm with 14 acres currently in organic production. Blackberry

grows vegetables and fruits and they raise chickens, both broilers and layers.

**I**f all goes well, the four will purchase Blackberry Meadows from the Duffs in 2008. Jen will be the farm manager. Their plan: increase the number of CSA shares from 120 this year to 150 in 2008, sell at more farm markets and sell produce to East End Food Co-op. If all goes well (namely if the funding falls into place), these four people, in their late 20s-early 30s, will buy the farm business in time for the 2008 growing season.

**T**heir new farm labor team consists of the foursome (two part-time), Greg’s parents, (part time), and Jack and Dale Duff. For three years prior to this transition year, the Duffs used Goodwill Industry’s workers on the farm. The job coach, drove the 3-5 person work crew to the farm every day and worked diligently alongside them. They arrived at 9am, left at 3pm. They were untrained and had differing abilities. Jack paid minimum wages to Goodwill, and the workers received their paycheck and benefits via Goodwill. Last year the job coach left, it clinched Jack’s decision to transition.

**S**o how will the foursome buy this established certified organic farm 15 miles northeast of Pittsburgh with 85 acres, a 3-bedroom stone house, a 50’ x 40’ garage, a 40’ x 50’ barn, a sheep shed, outbuildings, pond, irrigation, two high tunnels, a greenhouse and four tractors? Greg says, “Well, it hasn’t gone down yet, but we’ve applied for new and beginning farm loans from PDA and the Farm Service Agency (USDA).” They’re also interviewing / applying with the Progress Fund (as an agtourism business) for a flexible payment mortgage where they pay back a bigger chunk of the mortgage when they have more money from seasonal sales. Greg’s parents are going to move into the house and pay rent for three years while they work on the farm. Meanwhile the four co-owners are saving the money they make this year from CSA, retail, and wholesale sales to use for a downpayment, while making lease payments to the Duffs.

*continued*

It's a scenario that replaces the traditional father-to-son transfer of the farm and assets. In 2006, the Duffs decided that the physical nature of the work and all its attending responsibilities had become too much. They were faced with getting bigger, hiring a manager, and administering daily activities. They declined that option. Instead, Jack Duff, 60 years old, and his wife Dale, initiated the search for a farmer to buy Blackberry Meadows. They contacted Farm Links ([www.pafarmlinks.org](http://www.pafarmlinks.org)), and spread the word through friends, acquaintances, and CSA subscribers. Jen and Greg heard about it and found Jack at the South Side Farmers' Market.

The Duffs are selling at less than full market value because they want to sell it to new farmers who are caring stewards. "We cleared everything," Jack said, "we built everything. It was an old [neglected] farm when we bought it. We made this place, created it from nothing. It means a hell of a lot to us." He went on about the difficulties of even a successful succession, "It's not an easy thing, we don't have kids. Yet, it's like a father giving away his daughter at the altar. It's a positive thing, but gut wrenching. Bittersweet."

Initially, three different parties were interested in buying Blackberry: a chef, a couple that had been CSA subscribers, and the Boulos / Gamache / Montgomery team. Jack and Dale found them all to be good candidates. They chose the foursome because of their agriculture experience, youth, track record with grant writing, and their connections in the agriculture community.

Jen is optimistic about finding people to help them work the farm next year. "There are a lot of people out there who want to learn how to farm. They're our age or younger. There are low-interest loans to build worker housing, and we can offer free food. They can live cheaply here." She too plans to develop a future apprenticeship training program.

Blackberry doesn't deliver their CSA boxes to dropoff points, instead subscribers come to them. In fact, Jen wants to sell more to the local population of Natrona

Heights. When their 120 subscribers are on site for pick up, (approximately 200 people weekly), that's the opportunity for agri-tourism. Last week on pickup day, they put the chickens in the front yard, and a little boy in wonderment asked his mom, "is that where eggs come from?"

### **Sam Cantrell Maysie's Farm Conservation Center Chester County**

Maysie's is well known for its agricultural internships and training programs. For Sam Cantrell, who owns and runs the ecologically-minded farm and education center, says that it's getting a lot harder. "I have always depended solely on interns, but for the last few years, it isn't sufficient...in the best scenario, they come to the farm, learn, become useful and move on. It's an imperfect arrangement." In the face of difficulties, Sam remains constant in his idea to train people to become farmers. "The reason I'm still committed is this bottleneck that occurs in a local food system--a lack of farmers."

To ensure better production this year for his 175-share CSA, Sam reconfigured his budget in order to hire two immigrant laborers to be the back-

bone of his workforce. He's hoping they will provide increased productivity and long-term reliability while interns come for on-farm ecology education and food growing experience.

In Chester County, the most rapidly developing county in Pennsylvania, where good farmland is overrun with housing tracts and fertile soils are stockpiled for lawns, Sam sees a lot of land available for farming at the 5-, 10-, and 15-acre scale--big enough to support a family growing food for the community around it. Right now, Sam is in the process of sell-

**The reason I'm still committed [to training interns] is this bottleneck that occurs in the local food system - a lack of farmers.**

- Sam Cantrell,  
Maysie's Farm Conservation Center

ing and transferring development rights to his farm.

## Sustainable Ag is a Business

This issue so far is a “snapshot” of farmers thinking about generating new farmers. The successful ones are good producers and they possess good business skills. Both MeeCee Baker, PDA’s Director of Ag Education and Cheryl Cook, PDA’s Deputy Director of Marketing and Economic Development, are encouraged by the quality of agricultural education they’re seeing at high schools and colleges. For farmers young or old, it’s never too late to cultivate better business skills.

### Al Wegner Harrisburg Community College Dauphin County

Al Wenger, Program Coordinator for Harrisburg Area Community College, lays it out: “Farmers go to banks, apply for loans, pay back loans, accrue good (or bad) credit and do financial banking. New farmers, [young or mid-career] need to understand finance, credit, and money management.” He underscores the need for farmers to understand agriculture law (so they can apply for permits to expand operations), labor laws, and farm policy. They need to learn how to use computers, communication tools, and spreadsheets. They need to understand risk management, reason well, and make good decisions. All of this applies whether one is going into farming; or food distribution, processing, or service industries.

Al doesn’t differentiate between farming and agribusiness. His agriculture training program at HACC is based on new models that leave behind Depression-era thinking. “We respond to all the trends and offer a whole range of responses from global agriculture to local value-add production. There’s a niche for these kids in all ranges.”

The certificate program at HACC targets farmers interested in learning better business skills and high school students who start at HACC then move on to

four-year programs at Penn State or Delaware Valley.

## Conclusion

It appears that the answers to labor shortages in Pennsylvania leads to two parallel paths: one, is for new farmers equipped with business skills and ag production experience to get onto farmland with mechanisms in place to facilitate start-up costs. The second path, is for immigrant labor to help farmers optimize production on small and big farms.

Labor is likely to remain an ongoing constraint even if system-wide adjustments effectively take place. This leads to conversations that need to take place about increasing the supply of local food to meet its burgeoning demand; the recognition and promotion of small acreage farms; preserving and zoning land in / near cities for farming; and promoting farming as a real and viable profession—one with a secure future and good income.

In the likely future of petroleum scarcity, national security threats, and continuing food safety issues in globally-sourced food, there is an increasingly important and critical place for small farms supplying food to local communities. Just as there is a place for commodity-driven agriculture for export markets. The latter however, has dominated agriculture policy and economics for over 70 years. It is time to turn our attention, from the top down and bottom up, toward these conversations and discuss what’s working and what’s not, to connect the good programs, reform the bad, and institute new ones. And it’s time for people who eat food—farmers, consumers, bankers and planning board members—to raise the possibility and expectations that raising food in our communities is a win-win for everybody.

Please Note: Even though organic farmers were interviewed, we ask that readers consider this underlying message: whether organic or conventional, PASA or non-PASA members, local agricultural production is an important aspect to robust communities, local economies, and food security.

-David Eson / Director, PASA West

**See Resource List, next page >>>**

**A Resource List**, that is by no means all inclusive. Please get back to us with your additions to this list, it will be part of the final RFIN report and made available to this readership. Include a brief explanation of why / how the resource is relevant and include its web site address, or other contact info.

Certificate programs in Horticulture:

**CCAC-South Campus, Hort. Technology Program**

online / greenhouses (West Mifflin, Allegheny County)

**Bidwell Horticulture Technology Center**

City of Pittsburgh, Allegheny County

Certificate and degree programs in Agribusiness & Agriculture-related fields:

**Harrisburg Community College**

A comprehensive business skills program for agriculture and food production, processing, and services.

**Bloomsburg University**

**Penn State University**

**Slippery Rock, Master of Sustainability Program**

Online Resources:

**www.PaFarmLink.org**

New and beginning farmer workshops; Database and service that matches new farmers with farmland; Business development and planning, management, good recordkeeping; 2,000 hour apprenticeship program

**www.IPlanToFarm.org**

**www.MarketplaceForTheMind.com**

Agriculture job openings listed in agriculture; plus many great start-up resources

**A Beginning Farmer Online Course, \$80**

<http://washington.extension.psu.edu/agriculture/Begin%20Farm.pdf>

High Schools in Western PA w/Vocational Ag track:

**McGuffey High School** (Claysville, Washington County)

Agriscience, Ag Mechanics, Natural Resources Management

Technical Schools in West PA w/Vocational Ag track:

**Lenape Technical School** (Ford City, Armstrong County),

Pittsburgh Hispanic Center

**www.pghhispaniccenter.org**

They provide services for Hispanic and other immigrants, including translation, recruitment, placement and retention.