



Discussion Topic

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Workin' for a livin'

Once again the time has come to wonder whether Michigan's farmers will have adequate labor this year, starting in the greenhouse and moving all the way through Christmas tree harvest.

In the non-agriculture world, the question makes no sense. This state is suffering more than 10 percent unemployment, so obviously, there are more than enough people out there available for 25,000 seasonal jobs paying from minimum wage up to well in excess of \$20 an hour. And whenever a tide of anti-immigration sentiment floods the beach, excuses begin to float in. Farmers are accused of using and abusing an eager and often uneducated wave of immigrants out of sheer greed, and ignoring the masses of unemployed Americans.

The facts don't bear that out, though, said Craig Anderson, manager of Michigan Farm Bureau's Agriculture Labor and Safety Services (ALSS).

"People tend to get angry when agriculture tells them that Americans won't do the work, but that debate has never gotten us anywhere," he said. "People will believe what they want. It's time to get to the root of the problem, and that is that many Americans have a sense of entitlement, and they believe that hard labor in agriculture is beneath them. They've been told that by the media, by the attitudes promoted in some schools, and by some parents."

When schools offer students a passing grade for simply being in school and do not require them to take exams, the lesson is that productivity isn't paramount, Anderson said.

"Agricultural work is a skill," he said. "Schools don't teach it. Only long hours under a hot sun teaches the skill, and only the skilled can hope to earn the top dollar. Unfortunately, there are only a few people willing to master those skills, and, also unfortunately, very few of those people are outside the migrant labor stream for seasonal jobs."

People who learn the skills don't just learn how to quickly pick an apple or cut a cabbage, Anderson said. The skills involve decisions about color, size, quality and sanitation. They also learn the importance of accomplishing something, as opposed to just putting in time.

"They learn that they are most productive when they're accomplishing tasks," he said. "They learn that their choices affect their wages, in the case of piece work, and they learn skills that are prized by industries outside agriculture, if they choose to move on."

There are exceptions, of course. Over the years, many greenhouse operations have recruited stay-at-home moms who can be very productive when the season calls for increased labor, and many fruit and vegetable operations still attempt to employ local youths, who report making more money in a month than their peers make all summer in the food industry or other jobs. See the Michigan Farm News story "Molding a work ethic from age 14" in the Aug. 15, 2008, edition at Michiganfarmnews.com.

"The bottom line," Anderson said, "is whether Americans are willing to put forth the effort it takes to develop the skills that can lead to good pay and advancement in agricultural jobs. In some cases, those skills lead to farm ownership. Much of the evidence says Americans aren't willing, but maybe things are changing as people become desperate in a harsh economic environment."

QUESTIONS

1. What can your county Farm Bureau do to be sure local farmers have enough quality labor to bring in the harvest this year?

2. Why do you think Americans have gained the reputation of being unwilling to work in agriculture?

3. How can agriculture change to provide local jobs to local people to produce local products? Should it change?