

GUEST WORKER PROGRAM  
NEEDS OVERHAUL

BENEFITS EMPLOYEES  
WANT MOST IN A JOB

STRATEGIES TO RECRUIT  
AND RETAIN TALENT

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# Progressive FARMER



## LABOR PAINS

INSIDE AG'S  
WORKFORCE CRISIS  
AND HOW EMPLOYERS  
ARE ADAPTING



**SUMMER 2025**  
 VOL. 140 / NO. 6  
*Serving Our Readers Since 1886*



EVAN SEMÓN

**ON THE COVER**

Finding and retaining employees is a huge challenge for the ag industry because of its unique requirements.

Logan Pribbeno (above, middle) understands today's employees require a different management style to keep them satisfied.

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COVER ILLUSTRATION CREATED USING ADOBE FIREFLY FROM PROMPTS BY ANTHONY GREDER/ BARRY FALKNER

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# Understanding Ag's Labor Crisis



Program, which allows foreign workers to fill seasonal farm jobs when U.S. workers aren't available. Samantha Ayoub, associate economist with the American Farm Bureau Federation, notes that certified H-2A positions have jumped from under 100,000 in 2013 to nearly 400,000 today. Employers must first attempt to hire U.S. workers, but Ayoub says fewer than 3% of H-2A job postings result in domestic applications.

For growers like John Boelts, president of the Arizona Farm Bureau, who spoke with DTN Ag Policy Editor Chris Clayton, the situation is clear: "American agriculture is withering on the vine due to a lack of workers."

## What's Behind the Shortage?

Several overlapping factors are to blame.

- ▶ The U.S. labor participation rate has not rebounded to pre-COVID levels, Ayoub says.
- ▶ The nation's workforce is aging. By 2026, nearly a quarter of workers will be over 55, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.
- ▶ Fewer young people are entering ag careers.
- ▶ Long hours, tough work and rural isolation deter applicants.
- ▶ Immigration policies create uncertainty for employers and workers alike. Programs like H-2A are essential, but they're also complex, expensive and slow.

## Searching for Solutions

Despite all of this, there are success stories. In this issue, we'll show you how producers are getting creative—offering better benefits and more flexibility, focusing on workplace culture, training workers from other industries and making the most of the employees they do have. We'll also look at how some are using mentorship programs to bring new people into ag and explore the role technology might play in easing the load.

Agriculture's labor pains won't vanish overnight. We hope the advice and insights in this issue will help to ease some of that pain. ///

*Anthony Greder*

WE'D LIKE  
TO MENTION



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**H**ow hard is it to find good farm labor these days? According to a recent DTN/*Progressive Farmer* poll, it's very hard. Of the 76 ag employers who responded to our informal, online survey, 79% said hiring workers was "somewhat difficult" or "very difficult." Only about 8% found it "somewhat" or "very easy."

Though a small sample, it lines up with what we're hearing in interviews and seeing in national trends. Whether it's row-crop or livestock operations in the Midwest, dairies in the Northeast or fruit and vegetable farms out West, the story is the same: There aren't enough people willing—or able—to do the work.

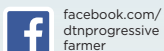
This special issue of *Progressive Farmer*, "Labor Pains," explores what's driving the worker shortage and shares strategies some producers are using to adapt.

## How Bad Is It Really?

The scope of the shortage is hard to fully capture. Federal agencies track employment numbers, but no single data set paints a complete picture. One expert trying to change that is Zachariah Rutledge, an assistant professor in the Department of Agricultural, Food and Resource Economics at Michigan State University. Over the past five years, he's surveyed around 2,500 farmers, and about half said they couldn't hire all the workers they needed. On average, those farms were running about 20% short on labor.

While many of his responses came from California, home to a high number of labor-intensive fruit and vegetable farms, Rutledge says labor shortages appear across all types of crop-production operations.

Another indicator is the growth of the H-2A Temporary Agricultural Workers



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## COVER STORY

# Good Help Is Hard To Find

*Changing demographics and generational shifts make attracting agriculture employees a challenge.*

>By Mark Moore

Stephanie Davis is on the front lines of the agricultural employment battle. As human resources business partner for Nexus Cooperative, she and her team are challenged to identify, recruit and secure employees for the 31 Nexus Cooperative sites located throughout northeast Iowa and southern Minnesota.



MARK MOORE

Stephanie Davis serves as Human Resources Business Partner with Nexus Cooperative.

With 215 full-time team members, Nexus provides services in four divisions, including grain, agronomy, feed and energy.

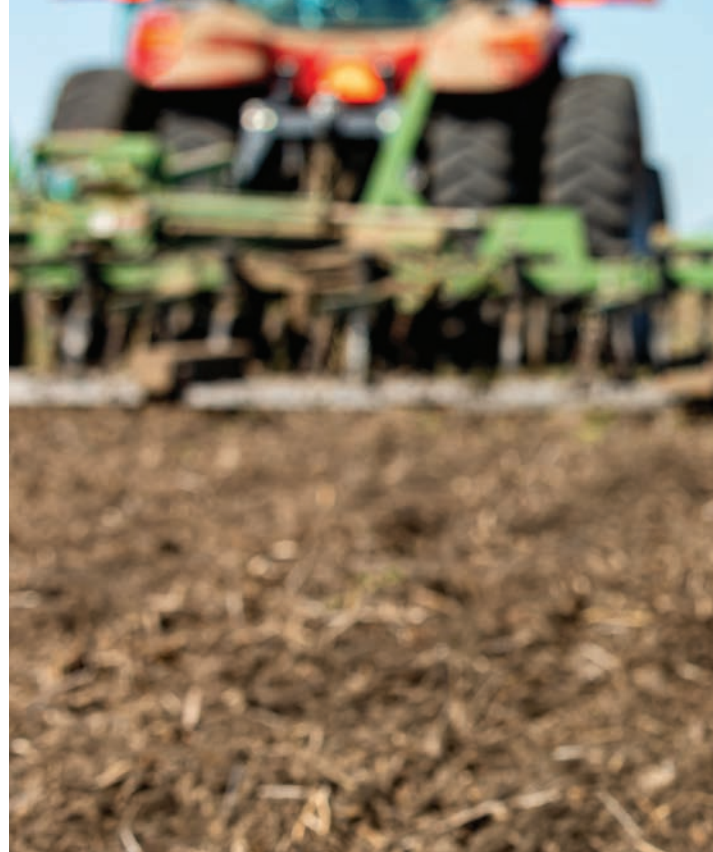
The biggest struggle? Getting candidates through the door.

“Our main challenge in finding employees is identifying the candidate that is a good fit for our team and has an understanding of the

work environment that agriculture entails,” Davis says. “And, to be honest, they must also be comfortable living in a rural setting.”

She explains that in the past, these sales and management roles may have been filled by sons or daughters of farmers in the area. But, the shrinking size of family units has significantly reduced that employee pool, meaning agricultural services industries are having to adjust their sites to identify future employees.

“We visit high schools within our cooperative’s footprint, attending career fairs and talking with FFA or 4-H members to tell them the career options we provide,” Davis says. “And, we’ve even started thinking outside the box.”



Davis and her team have turned to Facebook as one of their tools to scout out recruits. “We go to the towns surrounding our locations and will put our job openings on those towns’ community pages. Our hope is we might interest someone looking for employment who already lives in the community,” Davis says. “It’s a matter of getting in front of as many people as possible to find the right fit for our cooperative.”

Look at any message board or online chat, or bring up finding an employee at any rural coffee shop, and you’ll get the same response: Good help is hard to find. And, while finding that summer help for general labor might be difficult, the market to find skilled employees in the agricultural services sector is difficult on a scale magnified several times over.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, while overall employment of agricultural workers is projected to decline 2% from 2023 to 2033, about 116,400 openings for agricultural workers are projected each year, on average, over the decade. All those openings are expected to result from the need to replace workers who transfer to other occupations or exit the labor force, including retiring.



BONNIE JOHNSON

“Employee retention, compensation, competing for and recruiting talent continue to be top challenges faced by employers in the ag sector,” says Bonnie Johnson, marketing and communications manager with AgCareers. AgCareers works with employers and employees to find specific talent for the agricultural industry.



GETTY IMAGES

In the company's 2025 Agriculture & Food HR Review, a survey of employers in the U.S. agricultural industry, more than 65% of agricultural and food employers across the United States say they have had trouble finding candidates with the necessary skills needed by employers.

Educational opportunities in agriculture go well beyond the basics. Career studies include animal science, plant and soil science, farm management, food science, agronomy and agribusiness management. The challenge is getting these recent graduates connected with the companies that need them and placing the employees in locations where they are in demand.

"Employers are putting a much higher priority on employee retention and training because of the difficulty in recruiting new talent to their company," Johnson says.

The demand for support positions—seed sales, agronomist, consultant, applicator, mechanic, to name a few—is great. And, the talent pool is shallow.

Experts who work the front lines—securing the right employees and matching them with the right employer—share some of their experiences and reasons why there is a shortage, and also ways employers are working to attract that next generation to the areas these companies support.



MARK WASCHKE

### > THE WORKFORCE SHORTAGE

It's a numbers game. "One of the biggest factors isn't about education, skill set or geography, it's just simple math," says Mark Waschek, president of Ag 1 Source, which

provides agricultural recruitment and employment services for the agricultural industry. Each day, approximately 10,000 people in the U.S. turn 65 years of age, according to the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). "And, retirement has become more attractive, so they leave the workforce and create opportunities for people to take their place," he says. The problem is there's not enough talent available to fill the void.

"There are great organizations like FFA and 4-H who are working to get people from nontraditional backgrounds interested in production agriculture, but most people who go into production agriculture roles have been influenced by where they grew up and who they grew up with," Waschek explains. "With fewer people working at the farm gate every year, there are fewer people who come from these operations."

He also sees young people from an ag background going into other roles within agriculture that don't involve boots-on-the-ground work at the farm gate.

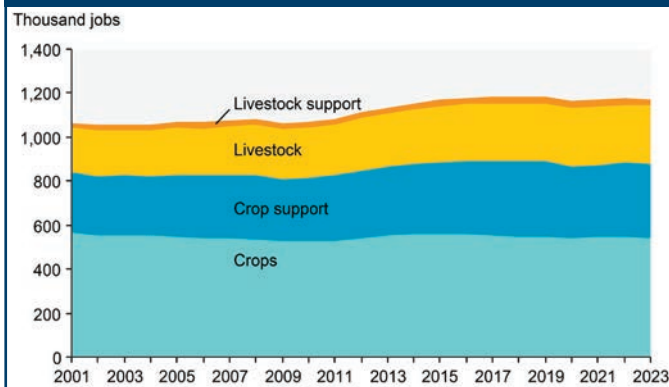
"Life sciences have seen a bump in the past few years, but the production-ag-related studies have been declining," Waschek says. "These roles are important, but they don't help fill the role of an applicator or seed salesperson."

The bottom line: A lot of people are leaving the ag industry every day, "and we do not have the capacity to fill it back up," he adds.

### > WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Sales roles, especially in agriculture, often mean long hours and time away from home. Ask any seed salesperson in rural South Dakota traveling to a customer function in the dead of winter two hours away from home. Or, the applicator working to fulfill orders at the height of planting. >

### U.S. EMPLOYMENT IN AGRICULTURE AND SUPPORT INDUSTRIES, 2001–23



SOURCE: USDA, ECONOMIC RESEARCH SERVICE USING DATA FROM U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR, QUARTERLY CENSUS OF EMPLOYMENT AND WAGES



MARK MOORE

While today's employees understand that these roles do require long hours, more and more prioritize flexibility and work-life balance over long hours, making traditional agricultural work less appealing.



TAMMY JENSEN

"While I do think it's a good thing that we are becoming more family-focused, it presents a challenge for production agriculture," says Tammy Jensen, president of agriCAREERS Inc., a company that works to match employers and employees in the agricultural industry. "If someone goes away to college, they often see their peers having regular jobs with regular hours. That's not always the case for production agriculture."

Jensen says a clear example occurred when she placed a person in a seed production role, which is the role this person wanted to do. Around the middle of summer, at the height of seed corn production, he wanted to take the weekend off to join friends for a bachelor party. "When you work in seed corn production, unless you have that conversation well in advance, you should know that time is critical to be on the job," she says.

While that person did take the time off, it also meant some serious discussions to ensure how future time off was handled during the detasseling season. "It boiled down to communication and a clear understanding of expectations," Jensen explains.

It also may be a matter of working with the employer to set realistic job expectations considering today's overall environment.

"Employers need to consider work-life balance and flexibility," Jensen says. "Recently, I was working with an employer looking for someone in a livestock management operation. The job description required work every holiday. That's not reasonable today. The employer had not changed the job description in 25 years. He evaluated the job and revised the job

Stephanie Davis (left) discusses potential job applicants with Lydia Tynan. Both work in the human resources department with Nexus Cooperative.

description to give more flexibility over holidays. It's critical that some jobs need to be done every day, but employers need to understand that you will have a very difficult time filling these roles long term unless you add some flexibility."

A territory job in the Midwest that Jensen is working to help fill expects the employee to be on the road overnight three to four nights a week. "That's a big challenge," she says. "It's not necessarily a bad thing that family is taking a priority, but that makes it hard to find someone willing to be away that many days a week."

### > RURAL LIVING CHALLENGES

While many revel in the rural lifestyle, being young and single in a small town may not be the most attractive—especially if you've recently graduated from college and have gotten a taste of urban life.

Getting younger employees to move back to rural areas is a daunting task for employers.

"One of the most frequent complaints of our employers is the challenge of rural recruitment,"

Johnson says. "They ask how they recruit in rural areas or bring employees back to rural areas."

She says more employers are finding that identifying young talent earlier in their company footprint can help. "We've seen with rural recruitment that working with young people, even in early high school, can provide information on job opportunities that are local and will keep those people in the area."

There's even been an increase in employees looking for rural employment opportunities that provide additional flexibility, including the option to work from home. "That's not always possible in some roles," Johnson says. "But, employers are looking at positions they need to fill and identifying ways they can adjust the role to accommodate these new employees."

Another challenge experts see is the dual income.

The demand for employees in small towns across rural areas is strong, but finding the right employees can be difficult.



MARK MOORE



JORDAN MORRIS

“Later generations are more likely to have dual incomes or careers,” says Jordan Morris, executive consultant with Morris Bixby Group. “It can be very difficult to find jobs for two in a small town. It often means commuting or moving closer to a larger population center.”

From a mental health and employee-retention challenge, meeting the needs of younger employees is difficult. “If you are 23 years old and want to launch your career, I don’t care how passionate you are about helping growers in a rural setting, you won’t last too long, physically or mentally, in a situation where you have nothing to do on a Friday or Saturday night, especially if your coworkers are older and have family obligations,” Waschek says. “It’s tough to do when there is absolutely nothing for an employee outside of work in those markets, because everything in those small towns is so family focused.”

### > TECHNOLOGICAL SOLUTIONS

The explosion in technology-related products and services in the agriculture industry may also be ferreting away potential employees from the traditional ag support roles.

“There are a tremendous number of startups in the precision agriculture technology space, and those companies need employees,” Morris says. And, a good portion of those employees may have previously filled sales or agronomy roles. “These companies have a lot of money, can offer a position in the agricultural industry without some of the stress and travel, and have the ‘cool’ factor that make the jobs enticing to a younger employee. Employees who want to work with producers have additional opportunities in emerging tech that may not always require long hours and travel.”

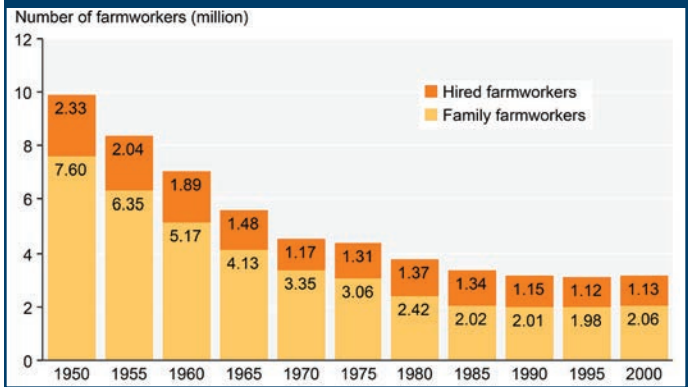
### > COMPENSATION AND CULTURE

Employee onboarding is critical for long-term success. “There have been studies that the average person in America, not necessarily agriculture, starts thinking about their next career move 14 days into their first job. And the reason is most companies have two weeks of onboarding, and then you’re on your own,” Waschek says. “It’s not that people are going to leave their company that year, but they’ve already made the determination if this is a long-term fit.”

According to AgCareers, nearly half of the companies surveyed provided salary increases to employees in excess of 3.6%, and remuneration was used to retain and motivate employees in 2024, including higher salaries, salary increases and incentive/bonus programs.

“I have an employer who is looking for an agronomy salesperson and can’t find someone because they are

## FAMILY AND HIRED FARMWORKERS ON U.S. FARMS, 1950–2000



SOURCE: USDA, ECONOMIC RESEARCH SERVICE USING DATA FROM USDA, NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL STATISTICS SERVICE, FARM LABOR SURVEY (FLS)

more than an hour away from a Walmart,” Jensen says. “That’s a tough situation, especially if someone is not from the area. There may be a need for the employers to add additional compensation to make up for the lack of amenities in the local area. And, maybe even add Amazon Prime to their compensation.”

Morris says compensation is high on the list for employees. “But, often, they may be making the same amount or even a little less, and back out if they discover there is a significant travel requirement,” he says.

### > NO EASY FIX

There’s a reason why some of the fastest-growing companies in agriculture are in the automation and drone sectors. “That’s a short-term fix,” Waschek says. “There’s a need for a long-term investment, because these jobs will still be necessary.”

The Chinese proverb, “The best time to plant an oak tree is 20 years ago; the second-best time is today,” is very appropriate for ag employers looking for long-term employees. “We have to stop holding out for people with the years of experience and think about the potential employees out there within 100 miles that have no experience,” Waschek says. “Bringing them onboard and making them a long-term asset will take more than just hiring them. It’s an entire system to invest in that tree of the future.

“Compensation is important, but it’s also necessary to look at it as a whole,” he continues. “You may have to pay more, but it’s not because an employee wants to make more. It’s because you have to compensate them for what they’re giving up. If you are giving up family time, you have to compensate. An employee may be willing to give up some of the flexibility of being 30 minutes from a major town, but you’re going to have to reward them for that. It’s not just paying somebody more just because they think they need more. You actually have to give yourself the mindset of, what are they giving up to work here?” ///

# Find the Right Fit

*Recruiting employees is more than just filling vacancies.*

**F**or Heidi Slinkman, finding the right employees for the family's cranberry operation is a significant challenge. "We have a vested interest in the cranberry industry, and we understand the hard work and dedication it takes," Slinkman says. "For us, it's more than the weather or markets that we have to manage. Finding the right employee who is a long-term asset to our farm is an incredible challenge."

Slinkman is the business manager for Gaynor Cranberry Co., a generational cranberry operation located near Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin, a well-known, major cranberry-producing area.

She can trace the family's farm roots back more than six generations. The farm was started by two brothers in 1876, and her great-grandfather worked there as a boy. Because they did not have any heirs who lived long enough to succeed the farm, the brothers passed the farm to her great-grandfather. Each generation since has helped the farm sustain, grow and evolve.

In addition to being a family member, Slinkman is also an employee, along with her sister, Jenna Dempze, who serves as agricultural operations manager. Their

parents, Gary and Susan Dempze, are also part of the operation, along with eight full-time employees who take an active role in the farm's management and operations.

One of those employees is marsh manager Ron Heller, who has been a part of the operation for more than 50 years.

"It's rare to find an employee who has been an integral part of any farm for so long," Slinkman says. But, it goes back even further. "His father was a foreman for the farm and actually worked with our great-grandfather. It's pretty remarkable and somewhat rare to find employees that work that long in one job and in the same industry, and on one farm."



Heidi Slinkman

*Tyler Hahn inspects and adjusts the sprinkler system in preparation for the key growing season. Hahn has been a part of Gaynor Cranberry Co. for nearly five years after working in landscaping and in the paper industry.*



That amount of experience can be nearly impossible to replace, yet Slinkman says the family is committed to having a succession plan in place that helps identify areas where they need to recruit and train employees for critical farm operations roles. “One of our takeaways is that there needs to be a very good match, so the person for the job and the position fits,” Slinkman says. That means recruiting not only for someone who has the skill set, but someone who is trainable and willing to learn. “And, they need to have a vested interest in the farm’s success,” she says.

Cranberry operations are highly specific, and many of the job requirements aren’t taught anywhere but on the farm. That can make targeting potential employees difficult. Job requirements include operating machinery, water management, crop management and harvest.

Slinkman says the farm has been fortunate to have employees who have been a part of the operation for so long, but it also has had to replace employees. Having a long-term employee plan in place helps identify the roles on the farm and provides a framework to match the right person with the right job.

Xander Kuklinski has been at Gaynor Cranberry Co. for nearly a year, joining the farm after graduating from high school. He was searching for a job that would allow him to work outside, provide some variety and give him the opportunity to learn. “What drew me in the most is that this job isn’t the same every day; we’re always working on something else,” he says. “And, because I’m new, I’m always learning.”

Kuklinski says it’s not just a job. It’s also being part of a team and having a sense of ownership in the success of the farm.

Tyler Hahn, who has worked for Gaynor Cranberry Co. for nearly five years, agrees. “I feel that I’m part of a family here. Everyone has a role, and all the jobs are important,” he says.

Hahn’s previous employment included work in landscaping as well as a local paper mill. He was hired after visiting with Slinkman at a local job fair and immediately was drawn to the work. “We are part of a team, and we all want to make this farm successful. I am emotionally connected to the farm, something I’ve never experienced in previous jobs,” he says.

## > DEFINED ROLES

Slinkman says each job on the farm has a defined role, which helps when recruiting employees. “We are better able to describe the position and match the role with the right employee,” she says. “We are building a team, and every team member has a defined role. That also helps us structure an employee’s pay and benefit package, because it lets them know their responsibilities, and we can measure their success.”

Like other farming operations, the competition for workers doesn’t always come from other agricultural employers. “When we are recruiting, we have other manufacturers, including the paper industry, we have to compete with for employees. These businesses have defined roles and salary and benefit structures. We have to ensure we are competitive,” Slinkman says. “That’s a challenge, which is why we work hard to find the employee that is the right fit for a long-term relationship.”

Farm employment isn’t just a job; it can be a lifestyle. And, like many farms, there’s the balance of living in a rural area with the amenities offered in a more suburban area. “We have times of the year that are very stressful,” Slinkman says. “And, the employees know the demands can be great. But, as an employer, we balance those demands with more flexibility during other times of the year. So, we give employees the flexibility to attend their children’s activities, go to doctors or have time to decompress.”

## > BENEFITS ARE IMPORTANT

A good salary and the chance to work outdoors might have been a good drawing card in the past, but it takes much more to attract employees today. Gaynor Cranberry Co. offers health insurance, retirement benefits and profit-sharing to its full-time employees.

*Xander Kuklinski joined Gaynor Cranberry Co. about a year ago, wanting a job that would allow him to work outside, provide some variety and give him the opportunity to learn.*

“Health insurance is incredibly expensive, but it’s something that we have to offer to attract the best employees,” Slinkman says. “And, because I’m also an employee, I understand how important that benefit is. We contribute to a health savings account. Benefits also include 401(k) contributions and profit-sharing. It benefits the employees, and it shows that we ▶



are committed to them and shows the value they bring to the farm.”

Slinkman says there’s no magic wand when it comes to finding employees. “In reality, there are plenty of good managers out there,” she says. “The key is attracting the right person and offering them a structure that will benefit both the company and the employee in the long term.”

The cranberry industry is highly specialized, so while there may be a number of good managers in the overall labor pool, there are a limited number with extensive experience in the industry. However, Slinkman says there is little to no “poaching” of employees from other cranberry farms. “While there are employees who move from one farm to another, it’s because the employee wasn’t a right fit. We’ve had employees that we’ve hired and trained and come to the mutual decision to part ways. It’s not something you want to do, but you discover that your goals may not line up. But, our industry is incredibly small, and we all want to succeed, so we look to build employees together.”

The state’s cranberry industry and its educational partners have helped to develop programs that identify and recruit employees. “There’s a great talent pool that may not have an intricate knowledge of the industry but are willing to learn,” Slinkman says. “The most challenging part is targeting those potential employees. We also work with high schools and youth organizations to show them that our industry can be a long-term employer. There is a consensus within the cranberry industry that we need to invest in the next generation, and that includes investing in future employees to show them there is a career pathway.”

Slinkman is experiencing that investment firsthand. One of the farm’s most recent employees started part time before graduating from high school. Seeing the opportunity and the skill set, Slinkman says the farm invested in that employee and, over the winter, paid for him to attend technical college to take welding classes. “Having someone who can fabricate our specialized equipment is valuable. He has been an incredible asset, and we have other managers who can mentor him,” she explains.

The farm does employ seasonal workers, and Slinkman will continually evaluate those employees to see if they would be long-term employee prospects. “We find those employees mostly through referrals,” she says. “We can evaluate them while on the farm, and if they have potential, we will stay in contact. It’s all



about networking to find the best employees and to use any tool you may have available.”

### > THE RIGHT BALANCE

One of the key benefits offered at Gaynor Cranberry Co. is housing. However, Slinkman says not all employees are a good fit for that benefit, so it’s important to tailor every benefit to the employee and the job requirements.

“Housing here includes the requirement to be readily available during certain growing times,” she says. “During the growing season, we have frost alarms that must be monitored. When one goes off, it’s critical to respond to save the crop.”

With housing close to the farm, those responsibilities are part of the job. But, not all employees may want that responsibility or benefit. “We value all our employees, and they provide so much for the farm,” Slinkman says. “But, we have to match our entire package, including housing, to match what the employee wants. It comes down to having an honest conversation with them.”

### > KEEPING WHAT YOU HAVE

Slinkman says that while hiring new employees is necessary, she prefers to take a proactive approach to keeping the best employees on board. “It takes a long time to fill a vacancy, so it’s vital that we try not to lose these employees,” she says. “Have an open dialogue with your employees and a clear understanding of their goals. It’s not always a bump in pay that will keep an employee happy.”

It comes down to the relationship. “Finding a good employee comes back to finding that person that you want to have a long-term relationship with,” Slinkman says. “That can be tricky, but finding the right talent isn’t easy.” ///

□ *Ron Heller (left) has been part of Gaynor Cranberry Co. for more than five decades and is a wealth of information for current employees.*

*This farm discovered its leader was already on the payroll.*

# The Accidental Manager

after violating company policies, Arnusch says.

As it turns out, he was doubly deceived: Arnusch had inadvertently hired his next farm manager, Clayton Stille, for the technician position.

“He somewhat sandbagged us in the interview process because he was being too humble,” Arnusch says. “We realized early on we had those two young men in the wrong roles. As it turns

out, we were blessed the situation happened, and we were able to promote Clayton.”

## > DON'T UNDERSSELL YOURSELF

A 23-year-old Iowa native, Stille worked on a variety row-crop and livestock operations during high school and then spent several years managing construction projects, including traveling the U.S. building transmission lines.

Stille says he was somewhat reserved during his interview for the technician position.

“I didn’t feel that a lot of my skills and qualifications would even pertain to the job description, and quite frankly, a lot of them didn’t,” he says. He had the mechanical skills, but it was hard to see how his experience determining whether to buy or lease construction equipment, and what kind of insurance a project needed would translate to a technician position. He hadn’t seen the farm manager listing and probably wouldn’t have applied if he had.

“I still should have been up front with Marc and Jill—they should have known what I was capable of,” he says.

Stille admits his job search was influenced by his primary goal: to marry his long-distance girlfriend.

**M**arc Arnusch has employed several foremen on the farm, but when his nephew-in-law decided to focus on growing his own operation, Arnusch knew he needed a genuine farm manager.

“I wear a lot of different hats,” the Keenesburg, Colorado, grower says. In addition to growing wheat and barley for seed, breweries and distilleries, plus other grains, Arnusch runs a water company and is bringing a mixed-use development to his town. “To do right by the farm, we needed someone in that leadership role.”

Arnusch wanted someone to not only supervise and execute planting, irrigating and harvesting, he needed someone to take over the planning, purchasing and business relationships of the farm.

He crafted a detailed job description and hired a recruiting firm to help him attract candidates and vet resumes. Ten people visited the farm to interview for that role and a technician opening.

The first farm manager he hired lasted three months.

“It was one of those things that we—gosh darn it—we made all the right moves. We did our homework,” he says, adding there are some things you just can’t learn about someone in an interview. “We were slow to hire, but then we were very quick to fire because he put our farm at risk”

**M**arc Arnusch with his new farm manager, Clayton Stille, at Arnusch Farms, in Keenesburg, Colorado





Clayton Stille and Marc Arnusch are growing a strong relationship that makes Stille feel like a part of the Arnusch family.

Achieving that goal meant finding a job in Colorado, where the couple wanted to settle.

“I was more worried about being able to marry my wife than the job,” he says. When he saw the online listing, he looked up the farm online and called directly. He wanted to relocate so badly that the reduced responsibilities and pay cut didn’t matter.

AgHires founder and CEO Lori Culler says most successful relocations are regional or involve moving closer to family, but they’re happening more often than in the past few years. Four of the last five farm managers her firm helped hire relocated for the job.

Convincing the right person to relocate often starts online. More than 70% of candidates will research potential employers online before they even apply,

according to a survey her firm conducted of nearly 700 job seekers.

### > MATCH THE MINDSET

The Arnusches needed to leave the farm for a few weeks in June 2024, but they had noticed troubling behavior with their first farm manager, so they talked to Stille about what needed to get done.

“We were mid-swing of it,” Stille recalls. They were cutting hay, preparing machinery for wheat harvest, irrigating, spraying and selling corn. “They put a lot of trust in me, and I take a lot of pride in that. Respectfully, this farm is Marc and Jill’s, but I like to run it as if it’s my own, because I hold myself to the highest standards I can.” >

That's exactly the entrepreneurial mindset Arnusch was looking for in his farm manager, even though it didn't come through Stille's early interviews.

"Make sure you have a lot of patience in this process," he says, adding that they were really impressed by a few candidates' initial interviews only to uncover things in later visits that weren't well-matched.

No matter how busy it is on the farm, it's worth taking your time throughout the process, Arnusch says. He learned a lot about himself and the farm in the process of writing a job description, and while it may be controversial, he suggests seeking out candidates beyond friends and family.

"We've had success hiring family. We've not had success hiring family, and we've had various levels of success hiring friends," he says. "Hire for character and develop the competency later on. Build your team based on what your needs truly are after you've written the job description."

### > PLAN FOR SUCCESS

Arnusch outlined what success looked like in the first five days, first two weeks, first month and so on, including measurable, specific metrics.

He structured the onboarding process to emphasize general knowledge of the farm's people, priorities and policies. Then it rolls up to an understanding of the fields and equipment, and then to the neighbors, vendors and other relationships.

"It takes close to a year to fully onboard a person so that they really understand what we do and how everything flows," Arnusch says.

Once he got over the shock of how much work goes into onboarding a new hire, Arnusch found he enjoyed how it retrained his own thought process.

"I think my biggest mistake is I assume too many things are just common sense. It's maybe not as common as you think, and that's not a reflection of the individual. That's a reflection of, it's all in my head, and it's not out there for everybody else to see."

Stille appreciates Arnusch's approach: There are no bad questions, and everything is a teaching moment. "To a young entrepreneur and dream-chaser like myself, that's everything you could ever ask for," Stille says.

### > CULTURE OVER COMPENSATION

Most job seekers expect to see compensation in a job listing, and pay isn't ranked in the top five factors they consider when evaluating a job offer, according to Culler's research. Nearly half of respondents rated culture at the top of their list.

She still recommends discussing pay early in the interview process to avoid mismatched expectations. Fortunately, the post-COVID era of runaway wage gains seem to be at an end, and Culler says annual pay increases are now back in the range of 3%.

There's a perception that farm work lacks work-life balance, and yet family-run and family-focused businesses are perceived as highly desirable places to work, Culler says. While busy seasons are expected, there's potential to offer extra vacation or reduced hours during slow seasons to compensate.

"Five years ago, I had a hard time even spelling culture," Arnusch says. "Now, it's at the heart of everything we do."

The farm emphasizes family, community, work-life balance and entrepreneurship, and backs it up with



policies that support employees who want to coach youth sports or run their own businesses during their downtime, for example.

*Marc Arnusch takes some time out of his day to sit with his granddaughter.*

Part of Marc's compensation plan for Stille includes a home as well as space for personal projects. His project involved bringing in a flock of sheep—the first animals to inhabit Arnusch's farm. Now that Stille's been around for a year, he's considering raising beef cows to sell locally.

Stille says he's excited for all the opportunities this job opened up. "If you don't align with the culture, it's never going to work," he says. "Then it's just a job, and you're just a paycheck."

Arnusch says it's exciting to see the ways Stille is growing as a leader and a manager. But, they've also grown to regard each other as family. Stille and his wife, Hallie, got married on the farm last November.

"You'll know when your culture is right. You will feel it," he says. "It's one of the greatest feelings you'll ever have when your team really comes together, and they start all pulling in the right direction." ///

# Guest Workers, Red Tape And a Broken System

*Inside America's farm labor crisis and ag's increasing reliance on foreign labor*



American agriculture is withering due to a severe shortage of workers, says John Boelts, a Yuma, Arizona, farmer and president of the Arizona Farm Bureau.

“We do not have the workers. We simply don't have the workers. American agriculture is withering on the vine due to a lack of workers,” Boelts says.

For years, farm groups have sought to legalize roughly 1 million undocumented farmworkers and reform the 40-year-old H-2A guest worker program, a process many describe as expensive, complicated and out of step with modern farm needs.



John Boelts

“Congress has artificially controlled our ability to legally hire,” Boelts says. “We have to go through the H-2A program, which is literally a program designed in 1986 by labor unions not to work. It was designed to be very expensive and to protect the American worker. So, it doesn't really work for American agriculture, but it's all we got until there's something better.”

Farmers nationally employ about 1.2 million workers overall, and it has been estimated that anywhere from 50 to 70% of those workers are undocumented or using false documents. About 90% of all farmworkers come from Mexico.

Where Boelts farms near the Mexican border, H-2A workers make up about 8,000 farm laborers out of an agricultural workforce of close to 50,000. There are another 12,000 to 15,000 workers who cross the border daily from Mexico to work on area farms, he says.

Yet, more farmers each year find themselves forced to turn to H-2A workers.

For many American farms, learning the rites of passage of the H-2A program has become one of their only means for ensuring they have reliable, legal workers. Despite a

*A farm worker outside of Brawley, California, rolls a tractor through a field as workers pull up drip irrigation water lines used for onion production.*

laundry list of complications and problems—such as more than 3,000 pages of new regulations under the Biden administration—even smaller farmers are relying on the H-2A program to fill their labor needs.

## > FARMS FIND VALUE IN FOREIGN LABOR

Steve Bowlin tells the story about how his farm began marketing fruits and vegetables outside of Olathe, Kansas, 15 years ago.

“This whole thing started because we had too much in the garden one year,” Bowlin says. “We found out quickly that the desire for fresh local produce is on the rise.”

Bowlin’s farm grows watermelons, cucumbers, pumpkins and tomatoes, as well as hanging baskets for local stores and other retailers as part of The Kansas City Food Hub.

Age, however, eventually led Bowlin to look for professional labor to help his farm four years ago. He’s had two H-2A guest workers from Mexico ever since. “I’m 68, and the rest of my crew was older, and we couldn’t find any kids who wanted to work or could work. Kids just don’t have the work ethic these two have. If we were going to continue to grow, we had to bring in some workers.”

Bowlin works with a law firm out of Tulsa, Oklahoma, that helps farmers navigate the H-2A program.

There can be language barriers, but Bowlin describes how his workers have taught him a thing or two about being more productive. In a greenhouse this year, Bowlin changed to growing cucumbers vertically on wires. “They do it that way in Mexico, and they showed us some pictures, and they [cucumbers] come out straight as

Guest workers are needed in many agriculture roles, such as on livestock, poultry and dairy farms.



A group of Latino workers harvest sweet corn in 90°F heat near Holtville, California.

an arrow,” Bowlin says. “These guys bring knowledge to the table. We are learning from them every day.”

Like a lot of farmers, Bowlin is

thrilled with the workers themselves, but the cost of the H-2A program is catching up with him.

“If it wasn’t for them [H-2A workers], we’d be in deep trouble, but they are about to price me out of the market—the government is,” Bowlin says.

## > CONTRACTORS HELP NAVIGATE MYRIAD RULES

H-2A places a lot of demand on farm employers. They are required to provide transportation for workers

to get their visas. For most Mexican workers, that means a trip to the U.S. consulate’s office in Monterey, Mexico. Farmers must provide housing that is approved by state inspectors. Employers also must provide transportation to and from the housing to the worksite.

“And, you’ve got to provide the housing, whether they’re using it or not,” Boelts says. “Here in Yuma, there’s housing all over the place that’s provided. And, guys go, ‘I’m gonna live in Mexico and cross everyday anyways, even though I’m in the H-2A program.’”

Sarah Black is general manager of Great Lakes Ag Labor Services LLC, a company started as a pilot project by the Michigan Farm Bureau in 2014 to help its members navigate the H-2A program. Great Lakes Ag Labor now works with more than 100 farmers in Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Texas and Wisconsin, partnering with the state Farm Bureau offices. Black says the company will bring in 2,600 workers this year.

“We basically started from the ground up,” Black says. “A few of our farms at the time were using H-2A, but a lot of members thought it was complicated, and it could be fraught with litigation if you don’t do it right. It’s so complicated,” Black continues, “and you can >

States With the Largest Share of H-2A Workers (percentage)	
Florida	12.3%
Georgia	11.3%
California	9.7%
Washington	9.3%
North Carolina	7.2%

SOURCE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR



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unintentionally do something or not do something, and not have any idea that is going to get you into trouble. The opportunities for them to come and find something wrong is not too hard if you don't work with someone you trust."

There are different models for H-2A contractors. Great Lakes works on the paperwork side, doing all the filing for a farm and recruiting the workers. The company ensures workers have appointments for visas at a consulate and makes travel arrangements for the workers to arrive in the U.S.

"We do everything on the front end," Black says. "But, then, when the worker arrives at the farm, they are the employee of the farmer, and so that farmer has control over the schedule and the day-to-day management. That's our model."

Initially, it was larger produce farms that used Great Lakes for finding workers at harvest. Over time, the profile of farms using the services has evolved, Black explains.

"What really has changed now is all kinds of farms use H-2A. Ten or 15 years ago, if you asked about H-2A, it was for the specialty guys who hand-pick fruits and vegetables. That's no longer the case. There is every type of walk or make of farm that is using the program," Black says.

Great Lakes even works to bring in workers for livestock, poultry and dairy farms that can't use it in the same way that other farmers do because of the restriction of seasonal or temporary.

"We've got dairy farm clients who are bringing in South Africans for equipment operations because they can't hire people domestically to help plant or haul manure, and do [other] things. So, what has changed

in the last five years is the labor pool has dwindled everywhere in agriculture, and all farms are

□ *A load of carrots harvested near Holtville, Calif.*



Steve Bowlin

using the program and have a need for it more so than maybe they did 15 or 20 years ago."

Black adds, "It's a big decision to get into H-2A. It's not something you want to do lightheartedly without really thinking through it."

## > H-2A CREATES WAGE PRESSURES

Ask any farmer who brings in H-2A workers, and they will tell you they do not understand how the U.S. Department of Labor comes up with the Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR). Based on data provided by the USDA farm labor survey, the Department of Labor calculates a new AEWR every year.

In Kansas, Bowlin and other farmers are required to pay \$19.21 an hour under the H-2A program.

That's \$3.42 more per hour than farmers are required to pay for the same work in Oklahoma or Texas. Kansas, surprisingly, ranks among the more expensive states on the H-2A pay scale.

"I don't know any farmers around here paying \$19.21 an hour and providing a place to live, and providing workers' comp, too," Bowlin says.

AEWR got more complicated in 2019 when the Biden administration set multiple different wage rates based on job classifications for the workers. That change pressed farm groups to demand more reforms to the program, because it started aggressively pricing farmers out of the program.

"That's opened up a lot of challenges on the ground and increased wages on the ground. So, it's both a question of cost and a question of complexity," says Kristi Boswell, a consultant with the law firm Alston and Bird. A former lobbyist for the American Farm Bureau Federation, Boswell worked on





agricultural labor as a USDA adviser during the first Trump administration.

“We already have farms consolidating or going out of business because they can’t access labor. The cost of H-2A is driving farms out of business as much as anything right now,” she says.

Frank Gieringer runs a u-pick-’em farm operation, Gieringer’s Family Farm, outside of Edgerton, Kansas. The Gieringer farm is known for its strawberries, but the operation also keeps adding to its agritourism aspects. Gieringer has four H-2A workers, and he also credits their work ethic.

“They know exactly what we need to do. They start on their own. They are never late for work. In the four years we’ve had them, we’ve had one employee take a day off because he was sick. They work every day. It’s a great opportunity for them. They can make more in a day than they can in a week or more in Mexico. They don’t have a lot of opportunities at home.”

Still, Gieringer also questions whether H-2A will continue to be a viable option for finding workers. “We have one of the lower costs of living here. I just don’t understand it. This isn’t going to be sustainable if it keeps going up year after year,” Gieringer says of the AEW. “We like the [H-2A] program but not some of the headaches that go along with it.”

Bowlin also likes the productivity he gets from his two guest workers, and he wants to continue with the program as long as it is practical.

“We’re already planning for next year and beyond as long as I can afford it,” Bowlin says. “As long as I can afford them, I’m not going to lose them. I think H-2A is a very good program, but I do think it needs to be tweaked a little bit. As produce farmers, we don’t have any safety

nets on our crops like the corn, the bean and wheat farmers. You can’t afford crop insurance on produce.”

As reliance on H-2A guest workers has surged from 200,000 to nearly 385,000 since 2017, U.S. agricultural imports also have climbed from \$125 million to \$213 million annually—putting new pressure on domestic farmers already facing labor and wage challenges.

Boelts says imports are particularly hurting specialty crop farmers in states such as California, Oregon and Washington, which also have some of the highest wage standards under the H-2A program. Those states are “canaries in the coal mine” when it comes to the impacts of high labor costs with H-2A.

“A lot of the products they grow are really coveted, but they are competing against a growing volume of foreign imports,” Boelts says. “And, they are just getting their asses kicked.”

He adds that farmers in Arizona are competing against produce farms in Mexico that are bringing in cheaper workers from other Central American countries.

“So, whether it’s folks in California or here in Arizona, you have a high cost of production compared to Mexico, and you’re competing with Mexico dollar for dollar in the store,” Boelts says.

## > WHAT’S NEXT?

President Donald Trump made it clear when he came into office that his administration was going to focus aggressively on border security. He has made good on that promise and has ramped up deportations.

At the same time, Trump also has opened the door for reforming agricultural labor policies. In April, Trump suggested that a new program will be set up to help legalize farmworkers and reduce the risk of farmers losing undocumented workers to mass deportations.

“We’re also going to work with our farmers, so if they have strong recommendations for their farms, for certain people, we’re going to let them stay in for awhile and work with farmers, and come back and go through a process, a legal process,” Trump said at a Cabinet meeting.

Trump added, “We have to take care of our farmers, the hotels, and you know, various, various places where they need the people.”

Boelts points to Trump’s comments about farmworkers “touching base” and coming back to work as ideally an opportunity for Congress to push ahead on a farm labor bill.

“Agriculture has been talking about it a little more vocally the last 10 years that there are several million people in this country documentally challenged, and the food that goes on the table every day is dependent on it, whether it be in the dairy sector or fresh fruits and vegetables.” >

# Avoid Guest Worker Pitfalls

Farmers are often surprised by the time commitments, costs and rules for hiring H-2A guest workers.

Here are a few things you need to know when deciding whether to bring in guest workers.

## Plan Ahead for Next Year

If you think you need help next year, start mapping out your H-2A plan now. The avalanche of requirements is complicated, overlapping and time sensitive.

Farmers need to start working with an H-2A contractor at least four months ahead of when workers are needed. Realistically, thinking at least six months out would help. Requests for workers should be filed with the state Department of Labor office at least 75 days before workers are needed.

Farmers then need to document their efforts to hire domestic workers, which includes accepting labor referrals from state workforce development agencies.

“A lot of farmers, if they haven’t looked into the program, think it’s like, ‘Hey, I can pick up a phone like I do for another service provider and get some guys in here in a couple weeks.’ That’s not how it works,” says Sarah Black, general manager of Great Lakes Ag Labor Services LLC.

Worker applications are sent to the U.S. Department of Labor, but they then must go to the Department of Homeland Security, as well. Then, the paperwork is sent to the U.S. State Department to coordinate a time for a visa interview at the consulate. It’s a very time-specific process, and paperwork must be completed within a window, or farmers won’t get their workers on time. In some cases, farms have had to start the paperwork process over to get workers.

While more than 90% of guest workers come from Mexico, getting visas approved in Mexico has slowed down because the secretary of state closed H-2 visa operations in Mexico City and Guadalajara, Mexico, pushing all that work to the consulate’s office in Monterey, Mexico.

Farmers will pay the costs to send potential guest workers to Monterey for interviews. Getting a visa application approved can take three working days after the interview. If a potential worker’s consulate interview is on a Friday, the farmer is paying to put up that visa applicant in a hotel in Monterey until potentially the next Wednesday to receive their visa.

“We’ve had several instances where we needed to schedule workers, and there were zero appointments available nationwide. And, we’re just one small company, so I think they [the State Department] have to figure out how to make that work,” Black says.

## Labor Needs Dictate How You Contract

There are also different models for bringing in workers. A small strawberry farm, for instance, may only need a handful of workers for a month to help with harvest. A farm labor contractor would already have a crew of workers and take



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care of the housing, payroll and day-to-day management of that crew, and minimize the paperwork needs for the farm.

If a farm needs workers for a full 10 months, though, a farm labor contractor is going to be more expensive, because a farmer would be paying that labor contractor a fee as part of the hourly rate for every payroll. Those fees add up fast.

## Housing Could Be a Stumbling Block

Farmers looking to hire their own H-2A workers must ensure they have housing that will be licensed and inspected by their state labor regulators. Generally, an apartment lease will work, but it still must be inspected.

A lot of rural areas, however, simply don’t have good housing options. Farmers who also have constructed housing for their workers have been caught off guard by updated regulations in the program. Make sure you know the current requirements.

John Boelts, president of the Arizona Farm Bureau, says the housing rules can be the “straw that broke the camel’s back” for some small farms trying to bring in H-2A workers, especially if the farm builds out housing only to be told it doesn’t meet the rules.

“I used to joke with people that if you stayed at the Waldorf Astoria in New York City, it would not cut muster for H-2A housing, because there’s no trash can in every room like H-2A housing was requiring at that time,” Boelts says.

Black explains that housing should be the first thing a farmer thinks about before moving ahead to sign up for H-2A workers.

“How are you going to deal with the housing? That’s the first stumbling block of H-2A is you have to get housing in order,” she says.

## What Does That Mean for the Rest Of Your Employees?

H-2A was initially set up to supplement a farm’s workforce if they could not find local workers. So, the Department of Labor requires all workers on the farm to have the same benefits provided to guest workers in a country. Essentially, any benefit offered to an H-2A worker must be offered to a domestic worker on a farm, as well. That also may mean understanding how much the farm will have to pay people for certain labor done by domestic workers based on the wages H-2A workers receive. The rules also require farmers to ensure everyone is covered under a workers’ compensation policy. ///



# THE AUTONOMY RIDDLE

*Farm labor won't be programmed away by the promises of intelligent technologies.*

Join any gaggle about autonomy, and one person or another will almost certainly posit that intelligent technologies will close agriculture's labor gap. A lofty goal that is, at least in the foreseeable future. More likely, smart technologies will find partnerships with humans. Intelligent, autonomous machines will perform mundane, repetitive, but also necessary, tasks—and with good value. Humans with more freed-up time can rise to greater opportunities in management of their farming enterprises and more.

But, not yet.

Chad Fiechter, assistant professor of ag economics at Purdue University, offered an observation about labor and technology at the 2025 Commodity Classic in Denver. He spoke of a farm-management model comparing the cost of labor with modeled corn and soybean farms deploying large, expensive, autonomous tractors and combines.

“[There are] a lot of assumptions baked into this model,” Fiechter acknowledged. “[But] what we found is that right now, at \$30 an hour in our model, there's never a scenario where autonomy is better than having labor do the work.” Further, he said, “there are probably a few of you who are saying, ‘We probably hit 30 bucks an hour already on labor’ ... and so our hope is to go further and try to figure out where that break[-even] point is. However, the grad student that

I've worked with [has] said, ‘We're not even close yet.’”

## > NOT WAITING ON AUTONOMY

Taylor Nelson is a fifth-generation farmer from Jackson, Nebraska. DTN/*Progressive Farmer* first caught up with him at the 2022 CES in Las Vegas. John Deere was displaying its new 8R autonomous tractor paired with a TruSet-enabled chisel plow—the tractor and plow positioned to do tillage work autonomously. Nelson was at the largest technology show in the world to speak inside the Deere building on behalf of Deere about technology on his own Nebraska farm. Here's what he told DTN/*Progressive Farmer* at the time:

“The most stressful time for us is harvest. We're under a strong time crunch. [Autonomous] tillage is a great first step that would allow us to have simultaneous operations at harvest (both harvest and tillage) ... and eliminate the need for additional labor.”

Three years later? “While I did some testing a couple years ago with an autonomous tractor on our farm, I have not heard or seen anymore about it. Since then, we have transitioned away from ‘holding our breath’ waiting on autonomy to help us with [our] seasonal labor shortage to working to hire the right

No longer holding his breath on autonomy, Taylor Nelson (above) focuses today on hiring employees who add high-skill value to the farm.

JOEL REICHENBERGER



JIM PATRICO

people, since it doesn't appear that the technology that would fit our system is ready to advance soon."

Nelson looks for employees skilled in sophisticated farming systems. He recruits hard and wide for them. He looks for employees with the dexterity to tease out all the automations on their monitors, to have solid diagnostic abilities, to troubleshoot independently. "I look for them being dynamic in their ability to add value to the farm. Hopefully, one day, autonomy will allow us to increase the value of the time we all spend working here," he says.

Wages and salaries plus contract labor costs represent 12% of production expenses for all farms, according to USDA. But, labor costs account for 42% of production expenses in greenhouse and nursery operations, and 40% in fruit and tree nut operations. On dairies dependent on immigrant workers, labor costs as a share of income are near 20-year highs. Greenhouses, nurseries, orchards and dairies are enterprises ripe for autonomy.

## > TECHNOLOGY WHERE IT COUNTS

There are dairy operations, for example, installing robotic milkers. These are systems that allow cows to milk at will that also collect data on each cow—feed intake, temperatures, daily activity and other interactions of daily life. The robots are direct competition to human employment. For managers, the robots create time for them that can be used more productively outside the barn.

Emily Mullen operates The Mullen Dairy and Creamery, in Okeana, Ohio (see photo, right). She invested \$250,000 in a Lely robotic milker for her 60 milking cows. The robot has the ability to manage twice as many cows, but Mullen has decided not to make the investment to unlock that capacity.

The robot gives her all manner of individual insight into each of her cows by way of transmitters hanging from their necks, so much that her vet bills have

**Farm employees need to be proficient in all levels of tech—from mechanical to microchips.**

dropped to near zero. The Lely robotic milker has increased milk output 20%, Mullen says.

With the Lely robotic milker online, Mullen does not need another dairyman. The robotic milker saves the expense of that salary (and the added management time that comes with an employee).

The robot has bought her crucial time to build other enterprises important to her plans for success. The milk check won't pay for the dairy.

One venture is in the name, the creamery side of the Mullen Dairy and Creamery. The Mullen creamery employs her sister and other family members. Producing 30 flavors of milk for retail customers and local businesses from several thousand pounds of milk per week earns the farm significantly more than what Mullen earns selling raw milk to a processor.

She is building a potentially important relationship with Crumbl Cookies, as well. The popular cookie chain has begun featuring some of her holiday milk flavors, like cotton candy and banana, in addition to the white milk already sold locally in the chain's stores.

"As a small producer," Mullen says, "I've had to diversify. My time has to be more valuable than the six hours a day I was spending in a parlor. Implementing the robotic milker gives me time to look into other business ventures."



Emily Mullen

JOEL REICHENBERGER

## > HIGH TECH FOR THE MUNDANE

Sabanto CEO Craig Rupp, Itasca, Illinois, is an early entrant into the autonomous tractor business. Sabanto sells a retrofit system called Steward that turns existing tractors into autonomous machines. Steward supports mowing, rototilling, rolling, aerating and seeding.

A significant portion of Sabanto's current business is in the sod industry. "They mow every two days," Rupp says. "I've got some farming operations, they're 15,000 acres. That means they are mowing over a million acres a year."

It is this kind of repetitive work for which Rupp believes autonomy is well-suited. "We think autonomy is going to go to those industries that do multiple, mundane field operations," he explains. >



“I call them high-frequency, like mowing.”

But, autonomous mowing is not employed at the expense of labor. “[Operators] want to take on more acres, they want to grow their operations. They are doing that not with more labor but with autonomy. But, autonomy isn’t about replacing workers; it’s about empowering them. These operations want to keep their labor resource and redeploy it.”

Sabanto operates between 100 to 200 systems mounted onto mainly utility-sized tractors in about 20 states. The retrofit packages include receivers, sensors, cameras, antennas, vehicle path-finding modules, hydraulic valves and actuators, among other parts.

▣ *Sabanto CEO Craig Rupp finds opportunities for his autonomous tractors in high-frequency field operations, such as mowing on sod farms.*

▣ *Monarch’s autonomous MK-V tractor finds a niche in feed pushing, an act of toil normally but one that yields real value.*

## > PUSHING FEED, PROFIT

Monarch Tractor, Livermore, California, has identified a niche in the dairy industry for its fully electric, driver-optional, smart MK-V tractor. It is in feed pushing.



Pushing uneaten feed back up to feeding cows is a vital role on a dairy operation. It requires some dexterity but does not require high skill. It is a tractor seat difficult to fill—especially for the night shift.

“We initially started off in the vineyard market, but once the dairy farmer started using it, and we started seeing how many hours they were using our tractor and the savings that they were getting, it became a focus area for us,” says Praveen Penmetsa, CEO and cofounder of Monarch Tractor. “We started talking to our dairy farmers; they all said the same thing, ‘Your tractor doing autonomous feed pushing will be the largest value for it.’”

The MK-V—without noise or exhaust—improves the environment of the dairy and keeps feed in front of milking cows. “The farmers that are using our autonomy feature are starting to see some milk-production increases,” Penmetsa says.

Monarch has customers in China, Europe and the United States.

“We help our customers remove the person from the tractor driving seat so that that person can do other things on the dairy farm,” he adds.

## > ON MY OWN? NOT YET

Jared Billadeau farms with his brother and dad in west-central North Dakota. He employs H-2A workers from South Africa and Ukraine on an operation that grows durum, canola, soybeans and corn.

“When I first started hearing [about] autonomy, I thought, ‘Oh, all right, it’s going to be great. It will be down to me and the seeder. But, that’s not going to be the case,’” Billadeau says. “I think autonomy is going to allow farms to grow and become more efficient, but you’re still going to have people. There are other things to do on the farm that is not just running equipment.”

As Sabanto’s Rupp suggests, Billadeau believes that rather than reducing labor, autonomous operations will allow him to move employees to more high-value jobs.

“I’m not going to need computer programmers by any means, but we’ll need the video game culture, [employees] who are able to shut out all the other noise around them and focus on one or two technologies in front of them, and be able to troubleshoot it.”

Nebraska farmer Nelson agrees. He doesn’t see autonomy or intelligent machines replacing employees.

“Farmers don’t go grab the ratchet anymore when they have bolts to tighten. They grab a battery-powered impact wrench,” he says. “In the same way, I don’t see farmers using seat time as the primary indicator of employee time. For them, there will be more efficient ways to do work and high-value tasks to be done.” //

# Grow Your Team

*Cultivate the perfect strategy to attract and retain top talent.*



EVAN SEMON

**F**ifth-generation Nebraska rancher Logan Pribbeno is aware that the roles of and the need for labor in agriculture have changed significantly in the past 50 years.

While this is largely due to technological advancements, increased mechanization and innovation resulting in fewer, more efficient farms, the availability and need for skilled, loyal farmworkers of all kinds remain high.

For Pribbeno, who left his family farm to attend college in California and worked in finance in the Bay Area for 10 years, this shift in labor has resulted in a workforce that is much more specialized than it was in his grandfather's or even his father's day.

To accommodate this generational change, he understands his family business needs to address and provide a change in needs, requests and expectations to attract and retain good, loyal employees for the long haul.

"Things are definitely different now than when my great-great-grandfather started our family farm, the Wine Glass, located near Imperial, Nebraska, more than a 100 years ago," says Pribbeno, who returned to his family ranch more than a decade ago.

"Our operation has gotten much simpler, which means we don't require as many staff as in the past. But, the staff that we do have is much more tech-savvy, and that's because it's much more important today."

Logan Pribbeno goes over paperwork with employees on his fifth-generation family ranch, Wine Glass Ranch, near Imperial, Nebraska. He adopted a "laid-back, West Coast management style" in hiring and retaining workers for the ranch.

## > FOOD FOR THOUGHT

So, what should those who operate a farm, ranch or other ag-related business do to not only find the best employees but retain them in today's work world? What are potential employees looking for in an employer, and what should employers do to attract them?

**AgHires.com**, which conducted a recent survey of 708 participants—60% male aged 15 to 56-plus employed within the agricultural industry and residing in the United States—revealed some of the things job seekers are looking for:

- ▶ 70% expect salary details in job postings. However, pay isn't ranked in the top five most important factors when considering a new job offer.
- ▶ The top three factors candidates look for in a job include job security, advancement opportunities and continued learning opportunities.
- ▶ 94% would at least listen and consider a new job if contacted by a company or recruiter.
- ▶ 47% find company culture very important when considering a new position.
- ▶ 50% start their job search on job boards, such as AgHires.com, followed by social media (21%), search engines (12%) and networking (11%).

With all of this in mind, what makes for an appealing agriculture-focused operation or business worth investigating and potentially applying for work?

Lori Culler, founder and owner of AgHires.com, says there are several things top ag employers do better than others.

“[Good employers] understand showcasing their value proposition—what do they have to offer their employees or future employees in terms of a great place to work, growth in knowledge, perks, etc.?” she says. “The ones who do it well know that they need to become an ‘employer of choice,’ and they take steps to do that.”

## > COMMON APPEAL

Culler says there are some common factors that make top employers appealing.

For one, they have a good online presence and an informative and easy-to-navigate website, and they post regularly on multiple social media platforms.

She says social media is essential to hiring in the 2020s. Sharing job listings on business social media accounts or third-party accounts is one of the best ways to communicate with candidates. It also portrays businesses as modern and “in the know” of the current trends.

“When candidates first see or hear of a job opening, the first action they take is researching the company online to get to know them to see if they want to apply,” says Culler, who started AgHires 11 years ago. “If there is not a lot of online presence, they are moving on to something else.”

The actual job listing—how it’s worded and what details it includes—is also important to attract high-quality candidates. Describe the open position and the company in a compelling way, and lead with the right information.

An attractive job description is one that inspires candidates to want to work for a company. It’s much easier to hire from a pool of candidates who are not only interested in but excited about the job based on the way it’s described.

Here are some ways businesses, including farmers and ranchers,



COURTESY OF IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

looking for employees can make their job posts more attractive:

- ▶ Create job titles that are specific and understandable. Qualified candidates who are looking for work know exactly what they are looking for. A clear job title that they are already in search of will catch their eye.
- ▶ Keep descriptions detailed but concise.
- ▶ Include a captivating background or summary of the position, and how it works within the company.

Jacob Parr (second from left) instructs Iowa State University Ag 450 Farm students as they learn through hands-on, experiential learning on complicated, mechanical ag equipment.

Top employers also make it clear in their descriptions that they offer benefits such as health, dental, a retirement plan such as a 401(k) and paid time off (PTO). Typically, PTO is at least two weeks that starts to accumulate on their first day.

For prospective employees, many fresh out of educational programs, when they look at job descriptions, they are looking for clear, up-front communication from the start.

Culler says these job seekers want advertisements to tell them what the positions entails as accurately as possible.

For Jacob Parr, Iowa State University’s (ISU) Ag 450 Farm manager, what he’s hearing from students preparing to enter the workforce is a myriad of things they want in an employer.

A 2018 ISU graduate of the farm who worked for a few years in agronomy sales, Parr says he sees something different post-COVID than what he wanted when he entered the workforce.

He sees prospective employees—himself included—wanting flexibility in a work schedule, which he acknowledges isn’t always easy to do.

“With most of the students I work around, the biggest thing I gauge they want/need is how the employer can help them grow,” says Parr, who plans to stay where he is and take on more responsibilities with the farm when he graduates with his advanced degree in May. “Whether this be career-oriented/leadership trainings, paying for continuing education classes or expecting ▶



COURTESY OF LORI CULLER, AGHIRES

Lori Culler

the company to offer growth opportunities, that is what most of the students leaving my classroom want.

“In the future, if I am looking, my advanced degree

focus was on precision technologies in agriculture, so I would be looking for an employer that is at the leading edge of this field and can offer me growth/learning opportunities within it to build my skills and be able to pass them along to those who are interested.”

### > COMPENSATION CLARITY

Listing starting salary or salary range is another factor educated graduates want spelled out in job descriptions. For them, including clear salary expectations often dictates whether they take the time to apply in the first place.

“If ag operations are not offering that right away, they are dramatically lowering their candidate pool,” Culler says.

“Even if it’s just a range, employees want to know what kind of compensation is on the table so they can go into conversations feeling confident, not worried

*Wine Glass Ranch holds a “Back to Grass” celebration annually in April, bringing together their employees, their families and neighbors for dinner and an evening of fun.*

that they’ll get stuck in a role that doesn’t match their worth,” she says. “Being open and honest from the start goes a long way toward building trust, and that’s something employees value in any workplace.”

And, while Culler admits there are no strong surveys of

*Logan Pribbeno (right) traded bonds for bottles when he left his finance job in California to return to run his family ranch more than a decade ago.*



EVAN SEMJON

compensation comparisons among similar or new positions in ag, she says the best way for a farm operation to evaluate compensation is to start with general resources, such as **salary.com**.

“It’s important to use these tools cautiously, as their data can sometimes be inaccurate, often skewing lower than the actual market rates,” Culler says. “I suggest focusing on understanding your specific local market. This means not only assessing what other farms are paying but also exploring what landscape, construction and industrial companies are offering for similar roles.”

Culler adds that employers can gather this information by networking with owners in other industries or reviewing job postings in their area to see the compensation ranges listed.

“With pay transparency laws now active in 15 states and expanding further, employers are increasingly including salary details in their job ads, providing a valuable opportunity to gauge market trends,” she says.

### > ESTABLISH INTERVIEW PRACTICES

Culler suggests once a business has crafted a compelling job description, the next step is implementing strategic interview practices to select the best candidates.

To ensure a good match between candidates and the organization, employers should use consistent, standardized questions to fairly evaluate candidates. They should go beyond interviews and intentionally discuss the candidate’s strengths and areas for improvement with references.



COURTESY OF LOGAN PRIBBENO

Top employers also move quickly and thoroughly through the hiring process, as the best candidates are off the market quickly. She recommends at least two, ideally three, interviews with a potential hire. And, employers can't have long gaps in between steps in the hiring process.

## > THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Culler adds that top employers also look outside the box for candidates. They are open to relatable backgrounds and are less worried about finding an exact match in terms of prior work experience.

For example, a candidate for a machinery sales role might not have sold that particular line of equipment, but the individual grew up in ag and sold something similar outside the industry.

With on-farm roles, businesses often hire military members with heavy-equipment experience and training versus only hiring prior farm-equipment operation experience.

"It's still a challenge to hire in agriculture—and the on-farm roles and mechanics are the toughest positions to fill in the market today," she says. "We still have relatively low unemployment rates, our participation rate as a nation continues to decrease and candidates are not as interested in farm manager roles. There is also a hesitancy on candidates in their early careers joining on-farm positions."

Culler also recommends employers should regularly attend job fairs and agriculture industry events to meet prospective employees and educate them about their company or operation.

And, working with an agriculture recruitment firm takes away much of the stress and work of finding the right candidates—allowing employers to focus on their day-to-day operations and the bigger picture.

With a new generation of employees also comes an interest in working for a company, farm or ranch that is active in their communities and showcases corporate values and social responsibility.

## > RETENTION OVER HIRING

Likewise, communicating an organization's sustainability efforts and ethical practices while fostering a positive culture can help retain and develop talent for long-term success.

While hiring new staff is always important, retaining employees who understand the work, are loyal and do good work is equally, if not more, important.

Engaging in community events, supporting local causes and partnering with educational institutions demonstrates a business' commitment to positively impacting the community.

Offering ongoing development programs that align with an organization's needs and employee interests encourages learning beyond employees' current roles and fosters career growth.

Pribbeno has adapted a lot of what he learned during his time working in finance to attract and retain top talent at Wine Glass Ranch.

What he calls the "laid-back, West Coast management style" focuses more on reward and less on reprisals—accepting that mistakes are often made because of lack of training and reinforcement.

Because generational priorities have changed, it's important to acknowledge and accommodate these as much as possible to keep employees happy and engaged.

"My dad always said, 'I'd rather be wealthy than right,' and that's something I keep in mind when working with employees," he says. "Generations are different today than they were in my grandpa's and dad's days, when the boomer generation worked hard and didn't place as much importance on work-life balance, time off, etc.

"Today, these are important to new hires, especially younger new hires. We have our busy seasons when we need employees here and working as much as necessary. But, when we're in our slower times, it's important to give employees lots of time off to spend with their families, interests, etc." ///

Wine Glass Ranch crew members volunteered at the local movie theater in Imperial this past winter.



COURTESY OF LOGAN PRIBBENO

# Mentorships Cultivate New Farmers

*Programs provide crucial knowledge transfer as agriculture faces an aging workforce.*

**N**o one steps into an agriculture-related career knowing everything. Even farmers with years of experience learn something new every day. Nevertheless, the more knowledge and experience young people can acquire at the beginning of their careers in agriculture, the better their chances of success.

It is an especially critical time to help the next generation get established in agriculture, as more farmers reach retirement age while significantly fewer farmers are new to the profession. At a 2024 event releasing the 2022 Ag Census, former U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack recognized the continued rise in the average age of farmers and the need to encourage more people into the profession. Young producers, age 34 or younger, amounted to only 296,480 of the 3.37 million producers in 2022, according to the Ag Census.

To bridge the gap between farmers near the end of their careers and those just beginning, organizations across the U.S. offer mentorship opportunities for young and beginning farmers. These promote farmer education, technical assistance and support to create successful farm businesses.

One such organization is Marbleseed, a nonprofit established in 1995, formerly known as the Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES). The organization primarily focuses on supporting farmers in their transition toward sustainable, organic farming systems.

*Nic Stapel, of Cellanie Farms, Waunakee, Wisconsin, is learning about organic farming from Marbleseed mentor Harriet Behar.*



COURTESY OF MARBLESEED

Tay Fatke, Marbleseed's farmer education manager, says the organization currently offers two mentorship programs: Farmer-to-Farmer Mentorship and mentorship through the Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP).

For the last 18 seasons, Marbleseed's Farmer-to-Farmer Mentorship Program has paired experienced organic farmers with applicants interested in learning best practices for organic farming and preparing for organic certification.

New to Marbleseed's offerings, TOPP is a nationwide USDA program that was launched in 2022 with partners in six U.S. regions. Marbleseed is a TOPP partner in the Midwest region, primarily working in Indiana and Wisconsin.

The success in these programs, Fatke explains, is in the mentor-to-mentee relationship built over time.

"We're letting farmers know they aren't alone," he says. "The organic community likes to support each other; they tend to not compete. There's so many opportunities. This is mentorship that's more guided, and it encourages beginning farmers to stay with what they're doing and rely on each other."

Years down the line, Fatke would like to measure success in the number of mentee farmers that become mentors.

"It's less likely that generations stay on the farm, so there's an education piece missing, and these programs help young and beginning farmers fill that gap," he adds.

## > MENTOR TO MENTEE

Beginning farmer Nic Stapel learned about Marbleseed's Farmer-to-Farmer Mentorship Program through word of mouth. He enrolled and was paired with one of the original founders of the MOSES mentorship program, Harriet Behar.

In December of 2023, Stapel and his wife, Betsy, purchased a 140-acre farm in Waunakee, Wisconsin. Currently, Cellanie Farms is an organic-in-transition, regenerative, mixed-production farm and orchard.

"Having the opportunity to buy land north of Madison in a fairly populated area, protect that land from development and create a place where the community can come together to experience agriculture and meet their producers turned out to be a very important mission for us," Stapel says.



Young farmer Dylan Farrell rents an area inside of the greenhouse at A&W Farms, in Cambridge, Iowa, for his organic vegetable operation.

For the last year, he has worked with Behar to transition the farm to organic, a process that takes three years. It's a process that Behar knows well.

Since 1973, Behar has grown organic vegetables and has held several roles in promoting organic farming and transition, and mentorship alike, in addition to selling organic vegetables at her local farmers' market. In 1988, she joined a group of local farmers who wanted to encourage organic farming in the La Farge, Wisconsin, area and became a marketer. That group of farmers eventually became Organic Valley, a large, farmer-owned cooperative and organic food brand.

As Behar's interest in organic farming grew, she took on a role as an organic inspector, visiting farms and processing facilities all over the U.S., Central America, Europe and Japan. At the same time, she worked for MOSES as the senior organic specialist, which led to her starting the nonprofit's mentorship program.

For 14 seasons, Behar paired mentors and mentees, and monitored the growth of the mentees through midseason and end-of-season surveys.

"Two things were almost universal," Behar says. "The mentees said having a mentor helped mature their operation by two or three years, and they would not be at the level they were in without the mentor. They also said their mentor helped them focus, which is very important. And, the mentors would say they felt like their place was to be a sounding board and to help the mentees focus."

After the pandemic, Behar took an 18-month break. Now, she actively provides farmer technical assistance in addition to advocacy for the Organic Farmers Association.

Behar says that throughout her career, she's always felt like a mentor, answering the organic info line at MOSES and guiding farmers and facilities in earning organic certification.

Through Marbleseed, she and Stapel were introduced in January of 2024, shortly after the

Stapels purchased the farm. Location proximity, the needs of the mentee and the experience of the mentor made the pair a perfect fit.

This year, the farm is focused on diversified vegetables, specialty crops, root crops and peach trees. Eventually, he and Betsy want to host events for the community to engage and pick their own produce.

"Harriet is very thoughtful and takes a measured approach to the way that she mentors. I think having her perspective on what's worked and what's not, things like companion cropping or field design, have been helpful," Stapel says. "Harriet would say our appetite is much bigger than our stomach at this point because we're taking on a lot, but we've been able to accelerate our progress. Having her influence helps me and my wife make sure that the systems we're designing will function properly in a market garden setting."

Finding mentorship has been beneficial to Stapel and Betsy, who don't come from agriculture backgrounds.

"Harriet's been very good about not giving us too much too quickly. But, also, we find common ground with other farmers through conferences, like the Organic Vegetable Production Conference. Sitting with those seasoned, diversified farmers, they have the small tips and tricks that you wouldn't pick up if you weren't around them," he says.

## > EXPANDED MENTORSHIPS

Before TOPP was financed by USDA, Behar explains she had a lot to do with this program's founding. Doing advocacy work, she says former U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown, from Ohio, tried to write mentorship programs into the farm bill without success.

"When Vilsack was looking at what to do to help farmers transition to organic, we said farmers need technical assistance and mentorship," Behar says. "TOPP is run by regional nonprofits because we felt those were the people who knew how to identify good mentors and had direct connections with possible >

mentees. We found the one-on-one interaction results in more success, because rather than talking to somebody over the phone, you've got someone following you through your journey."

In TOPP's first year, the program reached more than 15,000 people through 222 events held across the country. The partnerships with local organizations have contributed to the development of free educational resources, technical assistance workshops, organic workforce training and mentorship programs.

## > LABOR4LEARNING

Growing up in the suburbs of Ankeny, Iowa, Dylan Farrell learned about Practical Farmers of Iowa through his environmental science teacher in high school. He initially wanted to enlist in the military after graduation, but he changed plans two years ago and decided to pursue farming instead.

The Labor4Learning program pairs beginning farmers seeking employment and additional training in farm management and production skills with experienced farmers looking for help on their farm.

Through the program, Farrell was introduced to A&W Farms, in Cambridge, Iowa. He says he has gained valuable insights and mentorship from its owners, Caleb Akin and Noah Wendt, first-generation farmers who have been in business for 20 growing seasons.

Over the last two years, A&W Farms has allowed Farrell to rent an acre of land and part of a greenhouse to start his own business, while still working for the farm.

"I didn't have any experience coming into the Labor4Learning program, so it taught me about equipment operation, business management, and they helped me get going with growing vegetables, marketing, finances, farm operating loans and general knowledge of making a business profitable," he says.

Some Labor4Learning participants, such as Farrell, continue working for the farm and find their footing.

"They've been mentors for me with starting my own business, helping me get organic certification and trying to guide me with my business," he says.

In his second year of business, Farrell is learning valuable tips to grow his vegetable business, including borrowing large hay bales from A&W to act as a wind barrier surrounding his vegetable plot, figuring out which fences work best for deer control and finding additional help when labor is scarce.

"It's hard to find somebody that's motivated to work in agriculture and willing to learn; it's a challenging field," he says. "Sometimes, it's planting or tilling for 12 hours a day, but you have to get it done before hard weather hits. It would be good to have more laborers, but if the farm is not profitable, you can't hire more people."

Although officially no longer a Labor4Learning participant, A&W Farms and Farrell are now working through a TOPP mentorship with the Iowa Organic Association to help Farrell gain organic certification.

"Since we are first-generation farmers, we're able to give Dylan a perspective of trying new things. We're able to give him a decent perspective to his vegetable production and be open-minded," Wendt explains. "We're at a point, too, we've been farming for 20 years, so we have quite a bit of experience and knowledge on how to run the business, and it's helpful to give him that aspect, too. Some of the benefits we get from him is an open, younger mind that challenges us, as well.

"He's got a unique, entrepreneurial mind and good set of management skills, so we've been able to put him on deeper-level management stuff," Wendt adds. "This year, he took over the Organic System Plan. I helped coach him, but he did it, and that was helpful to the farm."

To connect with Harriet Behar, email [harriet@organicfarmersassociation.org](mailto:harriet@organicfarmersassociation.org).

To learn about more Marbleseed, visit [Marbleseed.org](http://Marbleseed.org). More information on Practical Farmers of Iowa can be found at [PracticalFarmers.org](http://PracticalFarmers.org).

Visit [OrganicTransition.org](http://OrganicTransition.org) to learn more about TOPP. ///



Dylan Farrell uses hay bales for wind control surrounding his organic vegetable plot.



> Story By Jennifer Carrico, @JennCattleGal

*Loan repayment programs aim to attract veterinarians to underserved rural areas.*

# Filling Critical Veterinary Gaps



COURTESY OF STILLWATER VETERINARY CLINIC

**V**eterinarians are a critical part of the livestock industry. They diagnose and treat illnesses, advise on animal nutrition and herd management, and help prevent disease through vaccination and biosecurity measures. But, lately, rural food animal veterinarian numbers have dwindled. This year, USDA has identified more than 200 areas across the country that are experiencing veterinarian shortages.

National and state-level programs are continually expanding to help drive veterinary students to rural areas and keep them there to provide the needed health-care access for livestock and animals in these areas.

“We are trying to cover a bigger area than we used to, which is a challenge,” says Jesse Olsen, owner and veterinarian at Stillwater Veterinary Clinic, in Absarokee, Montana. “When we came to this area 12 years ago, it was a veterinarian-rich area, and now many have retired, and practices have closed, so it has changed in a short amount of time.”

*Staff and veterinarians from Stillwater Veterinary Clinic, in Absarokee, Montana, work cattle for local producers.*

Olsen says one of the biggest challenges in south-central Montana is getting to clients in a timely manner because of the shortage of vets in the area. Stillwater’s clinic hired another veterinarian in the past year to bring the total to four at the main clinic. A second location for small animal work is in Columbus, Montana. Since the

practice doesn’t have many veterinarians, Olsen says they ask clients to haul animals in if possible and will only drive out about 70 miles to get to clients for emergency calls. “We want to be able to provide the care needed, but it gets difficult when producers are so far away,” he adds.

Olsen worked at a vet clinic during high school near the Billings area, but when it came time to go to college, he decided to major in engineering. After a year of those studies, he then changed over to animal systems technology at Montana State University. After that, he earned a master’s degree in animal science, focusing on reproductive endocrinology in beef cattle.

Olsen attended veterinary school in Washington state and then headed back to Montana where he and his wife, Tierney Olsen, who is also a vet, began practicing in Billings.

It wasn't until he realized he could qualify for grants through USDA to help pay for his veterinary schooling that Olsen knew he'd be able to be more comfortable in a rural Montana practice, where he is now.

USDA's Veterinary Medicine Loan Repayment Program (VMLRP) is a very competitive grant program, Olsen explains. It allows qualified vets to help pay a portion of the debt they incurred from receiving their veterinary medicine degree if they service areas of high-priority veterinary shortages. Those awarded receive up to \$120,000 toward student loan debt in exchange for staying in these vet-short areas for three years of service.

He says state veterinarians across the country can nominate certain areas of their state as an underserved food animal veterinarian area. South-central Montana qualified, and Olsen received the grant, which he has been able to renew to help repay his student loans. This will help keep him in this underserved area.

## > MANY AREAS HAVE VETERINARY SHORTAGES

According to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), USDA identified 243 veterinary shortage areas in 46 states in 2025. The use of the VMLRP in these areas helps protect the livestock industry and the agricultural economy.

The AVMA has also worked to get the Rural Veterinary Workforce Act reintroduced in Congress. The bipartisan legislation is designed to help recruit and retain veterinarians in underserved and rural areas.

"Recruiting and retaining veterinarians through the Rural Veterinary Workforce Act is key to protecting our nation's food supply, preserving animal welfare and upholding public health," says Dr. Sandra Faeh, AVMA president. "Livestock and public health veterinarians are essential to strengthening the nation's animal health infrastructure and agricultural economy. We urge Congress to address this increasingly important issue by passing the Rural Veterinary Workforce Act."

The legislation would expand the Veterinary Medicine Loan Repayment Program and end federal taxation on its awards of up to \$120,000 over three years. >

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COURTESY OF STILLWATER VETERINARY CLINIC

Montana veterinarian Jesse Olsen provides services in rural areas and is able to because of programs that helped him pay off college debt.

This change would align the tax code with human health care professions, allowing more veterinarians to serve in USDA-designated shortage areas while addressing their educational

debt. Only 883 veterinarians of the 2,197 applications have received the VMLRP since 2010.

U.S. Rep. Adrian Smith, from Nebraska, stated in an AVMA news release that the record shortages of veterinarians, especially in rural areas, could cause serious harm to the health of animals and the public. By providing additional funding to the VMLRP and updating the tax code, more veterinarians will qualify for this program.

“Veterinarians are vital to the work of America’s farmers and ranchers, and the integrity of our food

supply chain,” Smith stated in the release. “Yet many areas of the country suffer from lack of access to their services. This bipartisan bill would make commonsense tax relief available to veterinarians who choose to live and work in the communities which need their help to care for their livestock and protect the agriculture industry from pests and disease.”

### > CRITERIA MUST BE FOLLOWED IN ALL PROGRAMS

Many states also have their own programs to help veterinarians with loan repayment. To receive these awards, veterinarians must meet the criteria set for the specific state. One commonality with the state programs is the requirement that awardees must stay in that state for a set amount of time. Olsen says that with his USDA grant, he is required to report each quarter to show he has met the requirements set.

“With student loans, buying into a practice and buying land for a place to live, my family needed help, and I know this isn’t uncommon,” he says. “I wanted to practice food-production livestock, and with that comes less money, in general, than small animals, since you usually can’t work on as many in the same amount of time. This program is a big reason I can do what I want to be doing.”

Olsen says he’s thankful for programs that help veterinarians, because once reality sets in after vet school is done, most will see how much debt they are carrying. “The tough part about rural large-animal veterinary work is it doesn’t pay as well as some producers might think,” he adds. “There are long hours, and a lot of time is spent at the clinic. Sometimes, we must prioritize what works for the practice and our lifestyle.”

Getting new vets to join a practice takes good mentorship and fostering a work-life balance to keep them from getting burnt out. That—along with financial assistance to help pay off debt—is important to Olsen for the long-term success of his rural practice and to see more vet students cover underserved areas. ///