

ATTRAnews

Newsletter of the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service: A project of the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT)

Intelligent, hard-working employees are extremely valuable for a sustainable agriculture operation. This issue of ATTRAnews looks at ways to keep employees satisfied, so they will want to continue working on your farm or ranch.

Keeping Your Employees Happy and Your Production Profitable

Do you want to improve working conditions on your farm but aren't sure what's most important to employees? Think you can't afford to? Don't know where to start? These Ten Positive Practices will provide you with specific ideas and strategies to:

- Improve employee satisfaction and retention
- Increase productivity while reducing costs
- Improve access to markets that emphasize fair labor practices

Ten Positive Farm Labor Management Practices

Employees interviewed for a recent ATTRA publication identified the workplace conditions they most value. This list is arranged in that order.

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|-------------------------------|--|
| 1. Respectful Treatment | 7. Direct Hiring & Recruitment |
| 2. Fair Compensation | 8. Team-Based Management Structures |
| 3. Year-Round Employment | 9. Open Communication and Decision-Making |
| 4. Traditional Benefits | 10. Opportunities for Professional Development and Advancement |
| 5. Non-Traditional Benefits | |
| 6. Safe and Healthy Workplace | |

How Do Growers Benefit from Positive Labor Practices?

1. Increased retention and reduced training costs: One farmer, with a retention rate of approximately 90%, estimates annual savings of approximately \$20,000 to \$30,000 as a result of reduced training costs.

2. Reduced management costs: Motivated and committed employees require less supervision. Farms with fewer foremen or managers can save thousands of dollars while increasing worker satisfaction.

3. Improved product quality and better prices: A skilled, knowledgeable and committed workforce translates to higher quality products.

4. Reduced accidents and lower workers' compensation rates:

Reduced pesticide exposure on sustainable and organic farms, a slower pace of work, diversity of tasks, and teamwork in lifting heavy items can reduce accidents, injuries, and workers' compensation costs.

5. A more stable, knowledgeable, and trustworthy workforce: Employees who feel respected, valued and trusted are more likely to work harder and feel committed to the success of the farm business.



Photo by Judith Redmond

Taking Care of Business

Strategies for how to implement these practices vary in cost. Notice how many things you can do with very little monetary investment!

Low-Cost Strategies

- Respectful treatment
- Regular acknowledgement and appreciation
- Free food from the farm
- Personal loans
- Policies for communication and information sharing
- Clear grievance procedures
- Flexible work schedules
- Safe and healthy work environment
- Diversity of tasks
- Allow social services to conduct on-farm outreach
- Celebrations, team-building and appreciation parties

Medium-Cost Strategies

- Bonuses and profit-sharing
- Year-round employment
- Paid time off
- Retirement plans
- Educational assistance
- Opportunities for training and professional advancement

Higher-Cost Strategies

- Higher wages
- Health insurance

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Ag Labor Management Resources

Helpful Organizations and Websites

Agricultural Labor Management

University of California

www.cnr.berkeley.edu/ucce50/ag-labor

Downloadable books, research, articles, discussion groups, a dictionary, and other resources about ag labor management in English and Spanish

Agricultural Labor Management

University of Vermont

www.uvm.edu/~farmlabr/

Information about labor management for ag producers

Ag Manager Info

Kansas State University

www.agmanager.info

Information and tools for ag employers and managers

Agricultural Personnel Management Program

University of California, Berkeley

www.apmp.berkeley.edu

Information center on farm employment, management, and related policy issues

Agricultural Economics & Agribusiness Management

Michigan State University

www.msu.edu/~bitsch

News and information about labor laws and labor management on Dr. Vera Bitsch's site

The California Institute for Rural Studies

www.cirsinc.org

For more information about the handbook from this issue is excerpted, or for information about where to get technical assistance to help you make changes on your farm, contact info@cirsinc.org.

Farm Employers Labor Service

www.fels.org

Resources about labor laws, managing labor relations

Farmworker Institute for Education and Leadership Development (FIELD)

www.farmworkerinstitute.org

Education and training for agricultural employees

Publications

Ag Help Wanted: Guidelines for Managing Agricultural Labor

by H. Rosenberg et al. 2002.

www.aghelpwanted.org

How to Stabilize Your Farm Work Force and Increase Profits, Productivity, and Personal Satisfaction

by Suzanne Vaupel, Gary Johnston, Franz Kegel, Melissa Cadet, and Gregory Billikopf. 1995.

www.sarep.ucdavis.edu/pubs/pubs.html

Labor Management in Agriculture: Cultivating Personnel Productivity

by Gregorio Billikopf. 2003. Spanish or English.

www.cnr.berkeley.edu/ucce50/ag-labor

This issue of ATTRAnews is excerpted from a recent ATTRA publication, *Positive Practices in Farm Labor Management*. The guide is a collaboration between NCAT and the California Institute for Rural Studies (CIRS), based on case-study research conducted by CIRS. Interviews with farmers, farm managers and over 100 employees demonstrate that positive working conditions for farm employees can, and often do, go hand-in-hand with healthy profits for farm businesses.

ATTRA offers hundreds of free publications – many in Spanish – on organic and sustainable agriculture topics. They can be downloaded from ATTRA's website, www.attra.ncat.org. To order paper copies call: 800-346-9140; en Español: 800-411-3222.



New Market Opportunities: Adding Value to Your Products with Positive Labor Practices

It can be a financial challenge to improve compensation and benefits for your agricultural employees. However, new market-based opportunities may help you offset the costs of improving working conditions for your employees.

Many consumers today are looking to buy products from businesses that demonstrate social responsibility. Food retailers and restaurant chains have responded to this trend by setting standards throughout their supply chains that incorporate fair farm labor practices.

Producers can advertise their responsible labor practices directly to consumers or through certification and labeling programs. Below are several examples of U.S.-based programs that support and/or certify growers who cultivate positive labor management practices.

Agricultural Justice Project (AJP)

www.cata-farmworkers.org/ajp

The AJP is a collaboration of organizations that developed a Domestic Fair Trade label based on social justice standards for organic and sustainable agriculture.

Food Alliance

www.foodalliance.org

Food Alliance is a nonprofit, third-party certification program that promotes sustainable agriculture.

Scientific Certification Systems

www.scscertified.com

SCS offers numerous certification programs including social responsibility standards, a Fair Labor Practices and Community Benefits label, and the Veriflora label.

Socially Accountable Farm Employers (SAFE)

www.safeemployer.org

SAFE is a nonprofit organization that provides independent auditing and certification of fair, lawful farm labor practices in the agriculture industry.

How to Implement Positive Farm Labor Practices

1. Respectful Treatment

"Before, I worked with a contractor and was treated badly. Here there are policies. No one says anything in a mean way. That means a lot. When you are happier you work harder."

– Employee

- Create and enforce policies about how employees are to be treated.
- Provide employees with a degree of freedom to take care of personal and family needs.
- Check in with employees, inquire about their personal lives. Show that you care about them as people.

2. Fair Compensation

"We work harder here because we know that if the farm does well, we do well. At the end of the year, there are bonuses. In other places where I worked, they don't have bonuses."

– Employee

- Ensure that your pay scales are comparable or better than local farms.
- Offer incentives at least once per year, on employees' birthdays or as a reward for staying through harvest.
- Communicate clearly about how bonuses are calculated and how the farm is faring financially.
- Account for cost-of-living increases when making wage adjustments for employees.

3. Year-Round Employment

"We provide year-round employment. That's huge. It means that our workers can live here with their families. This is their community now. Families go to school here."

– Employer

- Diversify crop mix to allow for year-round production.
- Contract with neighbors to hire your workers in the off-season.
- Hire field staff to help with maintenance and repairs during the winter.
- Include value-added products that can be made and sold in the winter.

4. Traditional Benefits

"Housing has been a huge issue. It's a commitment of ours to help folks find housing. When anything is available, we snap it



Photo by Judith Redmond

up. We sign a lease. We make sure the rent gets paid, even when there aren't workers there."

– Employer

- Health Care: Provide health insurance or if costs are prohibitive, provide access to clinics, health screenings & education, referrals to low-cost care.
- Housing: Provide free or subsidized housing, or help workers find local housing and negotiate rentals.
- Paid time off: Offer paid vacation to employees working to the end of the year. Offer increasing amounts of paid time off for long-term employees.
- Retirement benefits: Encourage employees to save for retirement, matching contributions to 5% of wages.
- Overtime pay: Provide overtime after eight hours/day or 48 hours/week.

5. Non-Traditional Benefits

"You can bring all the food home that you want. We are eating a lot of vegetables. We all have more to eat."

– Employee

- Provide no-interest personal loans that employees pay back with payroll deductions, retirement plans.
- Allow social service agencies to conduct outreach on the farm. Pay employees for the time spent attending those sessions.
- Offer college scholarships for employees' children.



Photo by Judith Redmond

6. Safe, Healthy Workplace

- Diversify employee tasks throughout the day to prevent chronic injuries. Limit hand weeding, stoop labor to two hours a day.
- Encourage teamwork. For example, ask employees to carry heavy items with co-workers.
- Adopt sustainable farming practices to reduce workers' pesticide exposure.

7. Direct Hiring and Recruitment

- Recruit new employees via other farmworkers. This way your employees may be related or from a similar region. Employers report that this results in a more cohesive workforce with less interpersonal conflict.
- Prepare written job descriptions for new positions so everyone is clear about the employees' duties.
- Invest time in finding the right person for the job to save time and money later.

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Photo by Rex Dufour

8. Team-Based Management

"We have leaders with a lot of responsibility, but we don't call them foremen or mayordomos. We make sure their authority is limited...We encourage team management." – Employer

- Practice the MBWA management style—"management by walking around." Communicate directly with employees daily.
- Encourage collaboration between employees, allowing workers to help and train one another.

9. Open Communication and Decision Making

"Here we have meetings and the patrón informs us about what is happening on the farm. He takes us into account. He asks our opinion." – Employee

- Hold regular staff meetings on important topics such as production tasks, personnel conflicts, or safety concerns.
- Encourage employee feedback about workplace practices, production issues.

10. Professional Development and Advancement

"Here they give lots of opportunities for advancement. I started as a harvester and now I run machinery. They help you get the training and licenses to operate machinery. I want to keep moving up." – Employee

- Encourage & reward employee initiative to develop new skills and responsibilities. Expose employees to different aspects of the operation.
- Provide management training. Be sensitive to conflicts of interest that arise when workers are responsible for managing friends, family members.
- Provide opportunities for formal educational advancement at local community colleges.



Photo by Rex Dufour

New and Updated Publications from ATTRA

Farmers' Markets:
Marketing and Business Guide

Farm Energy Calculators: Tools for
Saving Money on the Farm

Cucumber Beetles: Organic and
Biorational Integrated Pest
Management

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