NEW YORK FRUIT QUARTERLY

Editorial

Agricultural Labor 2006

As we enter the month of July it would be prudent for us all to assess our position concerning our labor resources. What can we expect in the next six months? What will be the cost associated with harvest this upcoming season? Will I have an adequate pool of employees to meet my farm's needs? If any or all of these are your concerns, then you are not alone!

The unemployment rates in this country so far in 2006 have hovered at or about 5 percent. This is a rate that suggests that all those who need or desire to work, have currently found employment. There may be some shifting from job to job, but there is little need for anyone in this labor pool to seek positions in the agricultural, seasonal category. This leaves US agriculture with little recourse other than to seek those traditionally associated with the migrant stream.

The fact that there is already an enhanced border security in place has made an impact on those in this pool of potential employees. Worker shortages are already an everyday occurrence in 2006. At this point in time in 2005, there was certainly not such intense pressure to retain workers. This new awareness of the realities associated with not having workers in sufficient numbers has affected the hours and wages offered to these workers. It will be interesting to observe if Washington State, for example, releases as it has in the past, its harvest workers once the sweet cherry harvest is completed. Reports are suggesting that there will be efforts to find work to keep these workers around for the apple harvest. They learned a costly lesson in 2005 when workers that year did not need to travel as far north as Washington to find good paying jobs later in the year.

Here in New York each grower needs to stop and review all of the strategies at their disposal to insure an adequate supply of harvest workers. Each grower should realize by now that his or her potential workforce may have many more options to select from. This being the case, it becomes very important to put together the most attractive package to retain this necessary human resource. Housing, transportation and health care are factors that will be important to retaining an adequate number of workers.

The H2A program may offer some interesting options in 2006. I feel that it will provide some insurance as to the number of employees and the means to retain them. This second factor may be very important as the harvest in the state grinds on. We are already seeing offers to currently employed farm workers to move for as much as $2 more per hour.

The work in Washington, DC will continue during the summer and fall and will attempt to define how America will handle this immigration issue. Here in New York it is time to assess each farm's human resource program in order to protect your investment. This is not the time to be too conservative in your planning for harvest. If you fail to plan, you plan to fail!

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FRONT COVER: Sweet Cherry Trees covered with plastic nettings to prevent bird feeding. (Photo courtesy of NYSAES Field Research Unit.)

BACK COVER: Clean bins are essential to control postharvest rot of apples.

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