LABOR MANAGEMENT IN AGRICULTURE

Don Breazeale, Extension Educator, Pershing County

WHY BE CONCERNED ABOUT AGRICULTURAL LABOR MANAGEMENT?

Farm management textbooks will often refer to land, labor, capital, and management as the tools of production (Kay and Edwards, 1994). Hundreds of dollars can be spent on soil testing and fertilization, not to mention the thousands of dollars spent on land purchases. Financial planners, bankers, and others are available for financial planning and accounting assistance. Farm managers can be certified by different organizations concerning their knowledge of financial management and agronomic practices. However, when it comes to agricultural labor management, in many cases there is a lack of information or at least a lack of knowledge concerning sources of information available to farmers and ranchers in Nevada.

Gathering agricultural production worker data can be difficult. For example, the Nevada Agricultural Statistics Service estimates there are approximately 6,000 farm and ranch workers in Nevada, however this is not a published figure. The Nevada Department of Employment, Training, and Rehabilitation, Division of Research Analysis (1997) lists 2,108 agricultural production employees covered by unemployment insurance in the state. Of these, 1,036 are employed by livestock ranches and 1,072 work in crop production. These employees represent 172 livestock and crop production operations within the State of Nevada.

Although much of Nevada’s agricultural wealth is still associated with livestock and field crop operations, the value of vegetable crops has increased from $12.4 million in 1994 to $21.2 million in 1996. Intensive vegetable production requires large numbers of workers and higher levels of labor management knowledge. Due to increasing labor costs even extensive livestock and field crop operations are rethinking their labor management practices. Therefore, Nevada’s farmers and ranchers need relevant agricultural labor management information.

This fact sheet will address the principles and practices of agricultural labor management and provide a short listing of sources for those farmers and ranchers who desire further information on the subject. While not a “hard science,” agricultural labor management does have established principles and practices that have been shown to provide positive results. The more one understands about agricultural labor management the more likely one will be able to face the challenges presented by managing and supervising agricultural
workers. Whether you operate a farming or livestock operation, the control you have over production is a direct result of your ability to bring the best out of your employees.

According to Billikopf (1994) the three essential ingredients of effective labor administration are a concern for productivity and people, an understanding of human resource management, and purposeful action. Worker productivity and employee needs should be as much of a concern to producers as the productivity and needs of any other assets utilized by the farm or ranch; because in the long run, labor management must benefit both the employee and employer equally.

WHAT TOPICS ARE COVERED BY AGRICULTURAL LABOR MANAGEMENT?

While there is no all-inclusive listing of labor management topics, there are fundamental subject areas common to all basic labor management programs (Billikopf 1994; Rosenberg, Horowitz, and Egan, 1995).

1. Recruitment and Staffing – includes determining employer needs, developing a recruitment strategy, writing job descriptions, advertising for applicants, conducting interviews, testing of applicants, checking of references, making an offer, conducting an orientation. This process should provide a valid, reliable, and legal method of employee selection in order to avoid any discrimination charges.

2. Training and Appraisal – as an employer you should want all of your employees to succeed on their jobs. In order for this to happen you need to have a process (formal or informal) for transferring the knowledge and skills needed by employees. Required knowledge and skills should match those from the job description. Performance appraisals should also be fair, equitable, and again, be based upon the same knowledge and skills provided during the training period. While often a dreaded activity from management’s viewpoint, employees deserve constructive feedback from their employer during any appraisal period.

3. Compensation – wage structures will vary considerably depending on the type of agricultural operation in question (i.e. row crops, field crops, vegetables, cow-calf, and feedlot). Fairness of the pay structure and any pay differentials should be clearly explained to all employees. For example, some farm operations pay entry-level wages for general laborers, more for irrigators, and still more for tractor drivers while other farms may pay a standard wage for all employees. Other issues to consider include seniority pay, merit pay, promotion pay, and cost of living allowances (COLA). Another issue gaining in importance in Nevada concerns how to structure and implement an incentive pay scheme.

4. Supervision – really comes down to communication, and in particular, interacting with employees. Basic human interaction and listening skills can create a more relaxed work atmosphere. This has become more complicated in many regions of the country, including Nevada, due to the influx of agricultural workers from Mexico and other Latin American countries. Spanish-speaking supervisors and managers are a must in many farm
and ranch operations. Other areas of supervision include conflict resolution, discipline and termination. A certain amount of turnover in the work force can be expected. However, the time and effort expended on training new employees can be a real drain on an agricultural operation.

5. Policy, Regulations, and Laws – every farm and ranch employee should receive written documentation that explains such issues as staffing, employment and work conditions, compensation and benefit policies in a clear and concise manner. Many federal and state laws also apply to agricultural operations and include employment contracts, recruitment and hiring, workplace safety and health, wages, benefits, taxes, discipline and discharge, and the Immigration and Form Control Act passed by the U.S. Congress in 1986.

WHERE CAN I GET ADDITIONAL INFORMATION?

The University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) has developed an educational and research program for Agricultural Personnel Management. They have many publications, newsletters, videos, and web sites that contain information relevant to Nevada’s agricultural labor sector. While California’s labor management situation may not be the same as that found in Nevada, the principles and practices of agricultural labor management remain the same. The following references contain valuable information for anyone interested in gaining insight into the principles and practices associated with agricultural personnel and labor management.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

AG-HRnet forum. This is a free electronic forum on agricultural human resource management. Both management and legal issues are discussed and electronic versions of the People in Ag: Managing Farm Personnel newsletter are distributed regularly. The forum is managed by G.E. Billikopf. For more information on how to register, send an Email to gebillikopf@ucdavis.edu.


Rice, R.P. (1993). English/ Spanish Illustrated Dictionary. Written specifically for agriculture, includes domestic animals, farm equipment, fruits, vegetables, garden tools, insects, irrigation, mist propagation and construction tools. To order copies contact Glempler Publishing at 100 Countryside Drive, P.O. Box 270, Belleville, WI 53508. Telephone (800) 382-8473.


Sutter, Steve. (Editor) Agricultural Personnel Management Program. To subscribe to this newsletter call (209) 456-7560. University of California Agricultural Extension, 1720 South Maple Avenue.
Fresno, California 93702. Published since 1990 approximately 8 times per year, this newsletter offers information on labor laws and regulations affecting farm employment (e.g. EPA worker protection measures, immigration, and tax withholding), sexual harassment, and worker health and safety.

<http://www.are.Berkeley.EDU/APMP/>. The UCCE Agricultural Personnel Management Program web page offers a number of resources for participants including the ability to discuss agricultural labor issues with others, links to other pages, research and popular articles.

<http://www.cnr.berkeley.edu/ucce50/7grisha.htm>. Agricultural Labor Management. This web page includes the complete electronic version of Labor Management in Ag: Cultivating Personnel Productivity, research, and popular articles.

REFERENCES:


