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Produce industry challenged by labor shortage

By

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June 18, 2021

As if dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic wasn't challenging enough, this past year many companies in the produce industry have been dealing with unprecedented labor shortages.

According to the 2021 Farm Labor Survey, conducted by USDA's Economic Research Service, the data shows a serious problem with labor in the agricultural sector.

Labor shortages were caused by border closings, fewer young people entering the field and just an increase in acreage needing to be harvested.

"There's a tremendous labor shortage and it's hitting the agricultural community hard," said Alex Cracchiolo of USA Farm Labor Inc.

This isn't a new problem. American growers are facing labor shortage for the fourth consecutive year, with many crops lying unharvested due to a lack of farm hands.

The overall unemployment rate for the U.S. was 6.1 percent in April 2021. Among those not in the labor force in April, 2.8 million people were prevented from looking for work due to the pandemic. This measure is down from 3.7 million the month before.

It is not unrealistic to hypothesize that benefits offered through various unemployment programs are preventing lower-earning workers from aggressively pursuing permanent or seasonal jobs, including in the agriculture and food sectors.

This shortage has made agricultural produce from the U.S. uncompetitive globally, with many fruits and vegetables being imported to meet the demand.

Austin Fowler of Wolcott, NY-based Fowler Farms, said successful agricultural business requires a great deal of skills.

"Run down the course list offered at any university and we need a workforce enriched with them all," he said. "We have been relatively fortunate to have retained a great team for many years. We have partnered with trade schools, colleges, high schools, veterans outreach, and utilized county and state resources to acquire talented individuals that will lay the groundwork for a bright future."

Charlie Eagle, vice president of business development for Southern Specialties, based in Pompano Beach, FL, noted labor challenges appear to be both actual and anecdotal throughout the industry with some companies faring better than others.

"At Southern Specialties we made the decision, at the beginning of the pandemic to invest in keeping

as many of our workers on the payroll as possible,” he said. “That has worked in our favor today, although we still face some challenges. We encourage our team to bring in friends and family members interested in working through our referral program, in-house postings and online offerings. Our HR team has also worked with staffing agencies to help fill any gaps we have.”

Max Teplitski, chief science officer for the Produce Marketing Association, noted that despite the shortages, the produce industry has been fully operational during the darkest weeks of the pandemic.

“Ever since the CDC came out with the face mask requirements, every worker in our industry had a PPE, buses that brought workers into the field had to be retrofitted to prevent the spread of the virus, and those who got ill were quarantined in hotel rooms,” he said. “This was done at a great cost, which was borne by the industry. These unprecedented efforts bore fruit, and we did not see massive facility closures in the fresh produce industry.”

He noted that the pandemic impacted availability of immigrant seasonal labor worldwide as many ag powerhouse nations depend on access to immigrant seasonal labor. At the same time the current workforce is experiencing a skills gap due to changing work environments and an aging workforce.

PMA believes the industry’s efforts to champion the Ethical Charter for Treatment of Labor, which many in the fresh produce industry have enthusiastically endorsed, can help.

“Because workforce is so scarce, the vast majority of companies are going to unprecedented length to offer benefits,” Teplitski said. “Employers are trying to attract new talent, use technology, and trying to optimize their current labor force by introducing incentives and employee recognition programs.”

While produce growers still rely on human hands — cultural practices, thinning and harvesting — there is much automation and mechanization in the fields and that is helping.

“Innovation is taking place in the supply chain to alleviate labor issues,” Teplitski said. “This includes warehouse employees as well as truck drivers. We are also seeing a growing demand in the ag sector for highly skilled labor in the disciplines that were not traditionally associated with agriculture: such as big data analytics, robotics, and carbon/climate-related financing.”

For example, warehouse automation is being used to increase efficiency, speed and productivity as well as reduce human intervention. Pick and place technologies such as automated guided vehicles (AGVs), robotic picking, and automated storage and retrieval systems (ASRS) are being introduced. Use of drones for data collection, field surveys, chemical application is increasing efficiency and decreasing energy and labor.

Photo: Southern Specialties is working with staffing agencies to help fill any gaps it may have.

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