

Manage labor for success

By PAM GOLDEN

THE average farm laborer in Louisville, Ky., makes \$18,000 a year. A laborer who moves to Valdosta, Ga., can make \$25,000. If that's not warm enough, workers can take a pay cut in Tampa, Fla., where the average in the field is \$21,000. A musician trying to ply a trade while chasing a dream can pull in \$20,000 in Nashville, Tenn.

The job conditions are these: before sunup to after sundown, especially when it's time to get the grain in the bin; no days off for rain — that's when the cotton picker gets cleaned and the combine gets greased; and the heat index has no bearing when the cows need to be branded. It's backbreaking work in worse conditions than postal workers. That's what farmers have to offer.

And yet, ask farmers how long they can hold onto good employees and the numbers grow into decades — 20, 25, 35 years. The Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Ag Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year winners are some of those employers.

The first point each makes is how valuable the people around them are to the success of the operation.

"I wouldn't be the Farmer

Key Points

- Low employee turnover increases farm efficiency.
- Seasonal workers are most valuable when they return.
- Employer honesty begets employee loyalty.

of the Year if it wasn't for the people around me — my family, my John Deere dealer, my farm credit lender, my Southern States dealer, my employees," Kentucky Farmer of the Year Doug Langley says. "They all want you to succeed."

Perhaps that's why farmers often say their employees are like family. Ultimately, however, they're agribusinessmen, and their employees are on the payroll. Here are a few tips on how they keep them.

Value employees

Alabama Farmer of the Year David Wright calls 35-year employee Ed Smith his "whole right arm," and that's saying something because Wright lost his in a corn sheller when he was 14. Wright offers 401(k) plans and medical insurance to the nursery's employees.

"We pay not what we think we can get by with, but what we think the job is worth," Wright

LOYAL LABOR: Farmers who value their employees, pay appropriately and communicate effectively have low turnover — even with seasonal workers.

says. "We don't have anybody that works for us. We have people that work with us. There is a difference."

Be the migration stop

Langley employs six full-time laborers and 25 workers at harvest. He uses the H-2A program for his seasonal labor, but even those employees return each year.

"It's essential," Langley says. "Every farmer does things different. ... We're always trying to do it the most efficient and the best way. If I had to train new employees every year, I'd just be running an employee training center, for want of a better word."

Langley also learned to speak Spanish so he could better communicate what he wants an employee to do.

Complete the paperwork

Georgia Farmer of the Year Bill Brim devotes much of his time to farm labor issues. He currently has about 500 employees and uses the H-2A labor program that allows foreign nationals to legally work in the U.S.

"H-2A is a good program, and it provides us with reliable, hardworking employees," he says. "It involves a lot of paperwork, and we also provide lodging and transportation to and from their home countries for our guest workers."

Be honest

Cary and Layne Lightsey, the 2009 Florida Farmer of the Year and his brother, saw the economic downturn coming. So they called a meeting with their employees.

"We told them we're going to be in business, and we're going to be fine," Cary Lightsey remembers. However, they also told their employees, "We're not going to give any raises and we're not going to give any bonuses until we get through this."

They asked that everyone be particularly careful with equipment and cut corners when it was reasonable and safe.

During an August weekend after an intense period of cattle branding, two of those employees were working.

"I didn't ask them to do it," Cary says. "They just want to get caught up. They are loyal."



Learn employee management

LAND prices in the 1990s kept Doug Langley from growing his farm operation as quickly as he wanted.

It turns out he grew in more productive ways. "In that time I wasn't able to farm more land, I still was growing every year," Langley, the 2009 Kentucky Farmer of the Year, says. "I was hiring more people. I was learning to manage."

Langley didn't plan those slow land-growth periods. And at the time, he wasn't happy about it.

In retrospect, however, what happened naturally was what needed to happen.

"That would have been my opportunity to fail if I had grown too fast too quick," Langley says.

That's why this first-generation farmer has simple advice for those who would choose the same path.

"Go slow, work hard and be persistent," Langley says. "We didn't take on a lot of debt. We just did what we could and kept growing as we could."

Ag workers in demand, wage rates going up

WHILE unemployment percentages top the nightly news, the employment rate for farm employees is increasing — and so is their pay.

As of mid-July, the National Agricultural Statistics Service reported 1.238 million hired workers on farms and ranches, up 6% from a year earlier. Those workers also were being paid 30 cents an hour more, with the average wage up to \$10.64. Field workers received an average of \$10.04 per hour, up 38 cents from last July, while livestock workers earned \$10.03 per hour compared with \$9.98 a year earlier. The combined wage rate for field and livestock workers was \$10.04 per hour, up 30 cents from last year.

Of these hired workers, NASS reported 875,000 workers were hired directly by farm operators. Agricultural service employees on farms and ranches made up the remaining 363,000 workers.

If that's not enough employment euphoria, those workers

also are putting in less time.

"The number of hours worked averaged 39.8 hours for hired workers during the survey week [July 12-18], down 2% from a year ago," according to NASS.

Ups and downs

The largest increases in the number of hired workers from last year were in California and in the Lake (Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin), Corn Belt I (Illinois, Indiana and Ohio), Appalachian II (Kentucky, Tennessee and West Virginia), and Pacific (Oregon and Washington) regions.

The largest decreases in the number of hired workers from last year occurred in Florida and in the Delta (Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi) and Mountain II (Colorado, Nevada and Utah) regions.

Wet conditions in the Delta region compared with last year's dry reference week caused hired-worker demand to be lower.

Volume 14 ■ Number 10

Contents:

NewsWatch	1
Letters and Opinion	12
Crop Production	14
Machinery	20
Land/Farm Management	26
Classified/Marketplace	28
Southern Sampler	32
Marketing	34

POSTMASTER:

Please send address corrections to Mid-South Farmer, 255 38th Ave., Suite P, St. Charles, IL 60174-5410.

Contact us:

Editor: Cecil Yancy Jr.
P.O. Box 1, Henning, TN 38041
E-mail: cyancy@farmprogress.com

Contributors: Richard Davis, Pam Golden, Alan Newport, John Otte, J.T. Smith, Arlan Suderman

Executive Editor: Dan Crummett

Corporate Editorial Director: Willie Vogt, 651-454-6994, wvogt@farmprogress.com

Sales: Bill Pittard, 901-758-2743

Subscription questions: 1-800-441-1410

For additional sales and company information, see the last page of the Marketplace section.