

Farm takes lesson from large retailer

WAL-MART employs 1 out of every 257 Americans. That's more hires than any company in the United States, outside the federal government.

A Wal-Mart partner for more than 10 years, Sarah Frey Talley has learned a few things about people management while successfully navigating in the retailing giant's world.

"We share information with each other. We work together as a partnership," explains Sarah. "Wal-Mart is an incredible partnership that's allowed us to build a good base for our business."

Whether your farm operation

includes two people or hires 200 employees like Frey Farms, good people management is important to the overall success of the business.

Talley observes that Wal-Mart is very good at promoting employees within its own ranks. "Many people I did business with 10 to 12 years ago are now senior buyers," she says. "Wal-Mart taught me you treat everyone with respect."

Frey Farms tries to do the same. "A key principle we live by is the respect of each individual — whether it's a migrant worker or a chief financial officer of a company," says Sarah.



HARD WORK: Pumpkin harvest is a labor-intensive process that involves handpicking and loading the fruit into cardboard bins that hold 40 pumpkins each.

tracting, growing, shipping and marketing melons.

"We do a lot of water-melons," says Justin Talley, a field specialist at Frey Farms and Sarah's husband. "It's our biggest commodity."

Justin, Sarah and her four brothers travel extensively to work with specialty growers in Mexico, Texas, Florida, Georgia, Missouri, Indiana and Michigan.

"We buy melons year-round," explains Justin. The southern Illinois farm has a warehouse at Keenes that can load 30 semi-trailers a day during harvest. A second, bigger warehouse is located at Poseyville.

Frey Farms produces 700 acres of decorative pumpkins, along with 300 acres of processing pumpkins under contract with Libby's in White and Hamilton counties. In total, the business accounts for 12% of the state's 12,300 acres of pumpkins.

The Freys agree that the biggest challenge for most specialty growers is labor. "My life would be a lot easier if I could pick pumpkins with combines," says Sarah.

Each year, Frey Farms hires 100 to 150 migrant workers through the federal government's H-2A program, which establishes a legal means for ag employers to hire foreign workers for seasonal work in the United States.

"We provide housing and transportation," says Justin,

noting that many of the workers stay six to eight months out of the year.

The farm also has a rather unique and resourceful harvest operation. School buses have been converted into melon-hauling vehicles, serving as a quicker and cheaper way to transport produce than tractors and wagons.

"We have a motto around here: Just make it happen," says Sarah.

And they do.

Driven to work

APPEARANCES can be deceiving. Sarah Frey Talley might look like she should be in a glamour magazine instead of *Prairie Farmer*; but during a busy harvest season, you're more likely to find her behind the wheel of a semi in a remote field in southern Illinois.

Many farmers will relate to Sarah's story of renewing her Commercial Driver's License this year.

"I went to get my CDL renewed recently and am embarrassed to say I failed the test the first time. Another farmer came in behind me and he failed, too. So I went outside with my books and studied.

"I was there for two hours, but I passed the second time."

No-till passes conventional

RESULTS from a new survey of Illinois farms reveal that 33% of all crops were planted using no-till production methods, topping conventional tillage, which was used on 31% of cropland.

No-till's 33% is the highest level recorded since the Illinois Department of Agriculture began tracking use of crop tillage systems in 1994.

No-till was practiced in 51% of the state's soybean fields, the first time the figure has topped 50%. Increases also were observed in the number of no-till corn and small-grains fields. No-till was used to plant 17% of the corn crop and 36% of the small grains.

IDOA used the following parameters to define tillage practices for the survey:

Conventional: A full-width tillage system that leaves 0% to 15% residue after planting.

Reduced till: A full-width tillage system that leaves 16% to 30% residue after planting.

Mulch till: A full-width tillage system that leaves greater than 30% residue after planting.

No-till: Planting or drilling is accomplished in a narrow seedbed or slot created by coulters, row cleaners or disk openers. Crop residue greater than 30% remains after planting.

The 'T' factor

In addition to the increase in no-till acreage, the survey revealed an increase in the percentage of Illinois farmland with "tolerable" soil-loss levels. About 86% of the fields surveyed were below "T," the rate at which soil naturally replaces itself. Another 10% was slightly above "T" and will require only minor adjustments in crop production methods to fall within the tolerable range.

The Soil Erosion and Crop Tillage Transect Survey is conducted every two years and was completed with assistance from Illinois' 98 soil and water conservation districts and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Data was collected last spring and early summer from more than 51,000 fields across the state.

How tillage systems for all crops stack up

	% of fields surveyed with each system					
	2006	2004	2002	2001	2000	1999
No-till	33.1	29.2	30.2	29.3	29.1	25.8
Mulch till	16.4	17.2	15	17.8	18.7	15
Reduced till	19.3	20.1	19	21.2	21.2	22
Conventional	31.2	33.5	35.8	31.7	30.4	36.4
Unknown	0	0	0	0	0.6	0.8

SOURCE: ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

U of I research farm redo?

SEVERAL University of Illinois agricultural research stations located across the state may undergo a restructuring in the near term.

A task force, formed by the university, recommended closing three research farms and opening two new ones.

Here's a rundown:

- Close the Monmouth and DeKalb (Shabbona) crop facility and establish a new Northwestern Illinois Research and Education Center.

- Close the Brownstown and Dixon Springs crop facilities and establish a new Southern Illinois Research and Education Center in south-central Illinois.

- Expand activities at the Orr Research Center at Perry.

- Expand animal, horticultural and environmental research at the Dixon Springs Agricultural Center.

- Expand horticultural and environmental research at the St. Charles station.

"The purpose of this task force was to come up with a sustainable model for the U of I field-research facilities and suggest new ways to make them world-class facilities for research, education and outreach," says Ed McMillan, the chairman of the task force.

The task force's first priority is, however, to continue to provide researchers with access to Illinois' various soil types and climatic conditions. And because different regions of the state favor different types of livestock production, the respective field-research facilities should address those needs.

Farmers wanted to assess N rates

THE University of Illinois is looking for 100 farmers in the state to test nitrogen rates in replicated strips on their farms. Participants will be paid a small stipend to compensate for lower yields in low-N strips.

About 50 of these trials were conducted on Illinois farms in 2006, and U of I agronomist Emerson Nafziger would like to double those numbers in 2007. Trials will include fall-applied N and spring-applied N, depending on which of the practices the cooperators use.

There are five N rates — 0, 50, 100, 150 and 200 — with three strips of each rate randomized within three blocks for a total of 15 strips. Strips with N applied before planting (fall or spring) will have to be in the same direction as the rows will be planted. Autosteer is helpful, but not required.

Additional N, such as that in DAP or MAP, can be used, meaning that the lowest rate might be 20 to 30 pounds of N instead of 0. Researchers would like to get 25 or more of these trials in corn following corn and the rest in corn following soybeans.

Manure cannot have been applied in the past 10 years.

Funding to run these trials is available from fertilizer checkoff dollars. Howard Brown with Growmark has assisted on this work.

■ Contact Nafziger or Fabián Fernandez at (217) 333-4424.

Inside Illinois Ag Briefs

Baughner in National FFA

A Windsor High School FFA member has been selected to the 2006-07 National FFA officer team as the secretary. Kacy Baughner and five others were selected to the team from a field of 41 applicants. Fulfilling her position will require traveling more than 100,000 miles across 40 states, plus a trip to Japan. Baughner is a student at the University of Illinois.

Ethanol in Nokomis?

A group in Montgomery County has a plan to bring a 50 million-gallon dry-mill ethanol plant to Nokomis. Illinois Central Ethanol estimates it will use 18 million bushels of corn annually and will provide the area with 30 to 40 jobs when completed. Don Frank, board president of Illinois Central Ethanol, says construction on the plant is slated to begin in spring of 2007. Ethanol production should be under way by fall of 2008.