

Labor expert sees 'no quick fixes' for farm staffing

By Terry Anderson
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When farms and livestock production were much smaller, a farmer or feeder might have gone hours, even days, without speaking to anyone other than his wife bringing out lunch or the dog waiting at the end of the field.

Those days are gone. Producers are more apt to need more seasonal help or full-time employees to get all the work done. And they may be finding out that it's harder than it used to be when they could hire teenagers to load hay bales or neighbors to help shell corn.

"What leads to most problems is communications," said Sarah Fogleman, Kansas State Research and Extension specialist based in Chanute. "If you ask a producer, he won't say communications. But nine times out of 10, when they get to an issue, they don't know how to communicate. And for training and wages, it all ties to communications." Workers aren't the only ones farmers need to communicate with. Fogleman said they need to contact state and federal officials who can help with tax, accounting, immigration, training and safety issues.

"They have to get to know those within local regulatory offices," she said. "Get them to come out and tour the facility and see what they offer for training." Fogleman travels around the state to help agriculture producers with labor management issues. She will address family workforce concerns at the annual Risk and Profit Conference on Aug. 16-17 at the K-State Alumni Center in Manhattan.

"The people who I help the most are the smaller operations that are in the gap," she said. "Big enough to have employees, to have employee concerns, but small enough to not have the infrastructure, no handbook, no (human resources) department."

Actually hiring someone - recruiting and locating qualified applicants - can be a difficult step, not only to fill a role but also considering the expectations of today's workforce. "It's just people matching people. There's no one way to do it," Fogleman said. "Word of mouth still is very key and will always be key. You see some using placement services, college placement offices, newspaper ads, all with success."

What has changed is the increased need for technical skills by the workers. "They need more significant training than you can do with a high school kid," Fogleman said. "A lot of people are expecting more career-type positions."

"It's not enough to advertise for a farm hand any more. We don't have 'farm hands' any more. People we're hiring today are being more successful in these positions. They have the intellect to do a lot more and we need to treat them as such." That doesn't mean, however, that the part-time seasonal laborer will disappear but "more people are

wanting full-time jobs and those people are competing with, not just other farms and ranches, but just about anyone your community would want to hire,” Fogleman said. No single segment of agriculture has a more difficult time with staffing than another, she said. Dairies struggle to fill round-the-clock shifts but provide a steady full-time job. Workers at a swine confinement operation don’t have to work out in bad weather but they also never see the outdoors.

Immigrant labor has grown considerably over the years and farmers have been inconsistent in how they handle documentation, Fogleman said.

“Some people do well and some don’t know what they’re doing,” she said. “They’ll see an employee in front of them and put that person to work and not worry about the details.” But worry they should, especially if there are language issues. “If you have difficulty communicating with an English-speaking person who grew up three miles away, you will have trouble (communicating) with a Hispanic who grew up 2,000 miles away,” Fogleman said.

“There are no quick fixes. It takes training, no matter who you hire.” A guide to hiring a first employee is available at K-State’s *AgManager.info* web site.

“It won’t necessarily tell you what to do; it varies state by state,” she said. “But it gives phone numbers of agencies that handle certain things, such as withholding or forms to fill out.”