Innovative approaches improve farm labor

John W. Mamer  □  Robert W. Glover

A major educational effort to improve personnel management practices would benefit both workers and employers

The United States agricultural employment system is largely casual. Most employers and employees have few continuing ties that provide an assured quality work force on the one hand and adequate farmworker livelihood on the other. Labor practices are commonly those of a simpler, less commercial agriculture of an earlier time and are not suited to the needs of today's far more technically and organizationally sophisticated agriculture.

The changes in agriculture have led to some reassessment of traditional farm labor management and market mechanisms. A more mechanized highly technical, and commercial agriculture requires skilled workers. Workers are increasing pressure, and more employers are recognizing the need to reduce instability and improve employment efficiency, and hence the wage, of career farmworkers. Additional impetus for change has been the application to agriculture of employment, safety, health, and other labor standards already in force in other industries.

Nevertheless, low income and only intermittent employment for many farmworkers are still the rule rather than the exception. Each year, too many growers face an uncertain supply of labor while trying to cope with a casual labor market. Even where job-matching mechanisms exist, frequently they do not operate satisfactorily, or growers and workers lack the labor market skills to use them effectively.

Before labor use can be improved, the full dimensions of the problem, as well as recent trends and innovations, must be understood.

New approaches

In various places across the United States, labor problems are being approached in ways new to agriculture, ranging from collective bargaining to thorough application of modern labor management principles and practices. Unionization of farmworkers is being pursued with a new vigor in some areas. Although collective bargaining in agriculture goes back many years both in California and in the rest of the country, it is impossible to predict how widespread the unionization movement will become.

Some innovative farm employers have made progress in improving conditions of employment by applying ideas and methods long used by progressive nonagricultural employers. These farm employers include a citrus harvesting cooperative of 270 grower members in the coastal valleys of California, a large diversified agricultural producer in southern Florida, members of the shade tobacco growers' association in Massachusetts and Connecticut, a large association of canners and freezers in Wisconsin, and one of the nation's largest apple growers in Pennsylvania.

Through their personnel policies and practices, these firms have sought to establish a continuing relationship with their employees. They have evolved methods of meeting their skill needs while taking into account their workers' desires and concerns.

The harvesting cooperative, for exam-
ple, protects job rights by a recall system based on seniority, has a compensation system that encourages and rewards superior performance, and offers several nonwage benefits, such as a pension plan, paid vacations, and medical insurance.

In filling supervisory and management positions, the cooperative recruits internally. With one exception, all of the more than 30 crew leader positions and all of the other supervisory and management positions are currently staffed by individuals who first came to work as citrus pickers.

The crews, essentially the same workers who have returned year after year, have become increasingly proficient. From 1965 to 1981, the boxes picked per hour increased from 3.38 to 8.36. Hourly earnings rose from an average of $1.77 to $6.40 in that same period. Although it is widely believed that young people are difficult to employ successfully in agriculture, for more than a quarter of a century these association members have been employing thousands of youth in tasks that are not among the more attractive types of farm work.

The association solved the problem by establishing a well-organized apprenticeship program in which canning and seasonal field workers (who are also employees of these firms) could be upgraded to the more skilled and longer term jobs.

The apprenticeship program has graduated 279 maintenance mechanics from a four-year course and currently has 128 apprentices in training. A number of former apprentices have gone on to become supervisors and managers in their respective firms. The quality of the training and the completion rate are excellent, so much so that the Wisconsin state official overseeing such programs considers this to be perhaps the best apprenticeship program in the state.

The Pennsylvanian apple grower, a large operation in an area of limited local population and faced with a short harvest season, has an aggressive employee relations program. The company harvest cost per box increased from 62 cents to $1.29 in the 1965-81 period.

The diversified agricultural producer in southern Florida identified housing for its seasonal workers as the most serious factor in its crew turnover problem. The firm privately financed and built a farmworker housing project, including 192 units, a church, day-care center, post office, and laundry, enabling it to offer its workers above-average housing. Its seasonal workers are employed seven months of the year, and any family wishing to work elsewhere off season can retain occupancy of its unit and resume residence on returning. The firm reports that turnover rate of employees living in the project has been reduced to less than 2 percent annually.

Members of the shade tobacco growers’ association in Connecticut and Massachusetts, faced with the need to recruit thousands of seasonal workers each year, developed a program that provides summer employment for about 5,000 high school students (14 to 17 years of age) who perform cultural and harvest tasks.

Most of the students are local residents, but some come from as far away as Florida and Mississippi. Most are recruited through their schools, and they are often accompanied and supervised by teachers. Association members provide excellent dormitory-type housing and off-hours recreational programs for nonlocal youth. Wage premiums and other incentives are structured to encourage the workers to remain through the season and minimize absenteeism.

Additional suggestions include coordination among federal agencies in matters related to farm labor; utilization of federal rural development programs in efforts to stabilize agricultural employment in areas of major seasonal farmworker populations; review of the federal farmworker housing program to make it more effective; modifications of job-training programs to make it easier for farmworkers to move up the skill ladder; and continued dialogue among representatives of employers, researchers, and farmworker organizations.

A community of farmers and workers exists who would like to see the problems solved and who, if properly informed and involved, can be expected to make the reasonable adjustments needed.

John W. Mamer is an Economist, Cooperative Extension, University of California, Berkeley, and Robert W. Glover is Director, Center for the Study of Human Resources, University of Texas, Austin. Both are members of the Agricultural Employment Work Group. Dr. Glover chaired the group.