

Pac Mountain Region Agriculture Labor Survey Findings



This survey was conducted as part of an evaluation of the needs of agricultural employers in the Pac Mountain region of western Washington. This region covers Grays Harbor, Lewis, Mason, Pacific, and Thurston Counties. Results from the survey are reported below. It was conducted between March and early May 2024. In total seventy-five crop and livestock producers responded across the five counties. This survey was completed by WSU Extension in collaboration with the Thurston Economic Development Council, and Garden Raised Bounty (GRuB) with funding provided by Pac Mountain Workforce Development Council.

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Author Notes on Prevailing Themes in Respondent Comments

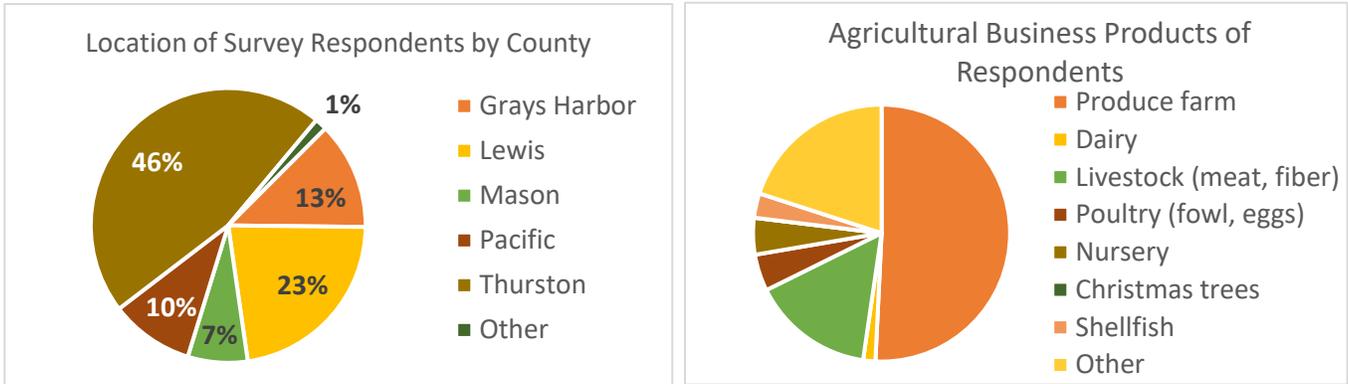
The best information in this survey is that obtained directly from the respondents in their answers, below. That said, a few themes are worth extracting and compiling at the outset.

A large portion of farm employers in the region are frustrated by labor economics and the current situation with agriculture economics in general; in particular, there is acknowledgement of the disconnect in the relationships between labor costs, input costs, food prices, worker cost-of-living, and international trade. This is recognized as a problem operating at, and with impacts at, both the micro (employee) and macro (regional and even global workforce) scales.

What is understood is that the economics of food production and labor don't sum. Personal, cultural, and social inclinations cause employers to attribute causes variously, whether minimum wage, foreign trade, work ethic, or other. But collectively there is agreement that the issue of agricultural labor is systemic, complex, and not in the favor of agricultural employers, specifically in this region and state. Proposed solutions are diverse as well and include everything from specific requests for support on hiring and position advertising to interest in training, apprenticeships, equipment advances, modifications to overtime laws, on-farm worker trainings, and workforce placement pipelines, as well as more complex regional funding initiatives and reorganization of foreign farmworker programs.

Survey Findings

Location of Survey Respondents and Nature of Agricultural Businesses



Respondents produce a wide array of products in the region. In addition to those noted above were combinations of two or more (dairy/meat, beef/poultry/eggs), floriculture, corn silage, medicinal herbs, apples, cider, flowers, fiber, forage (orchardgrass, silage), and small grains (wheat, barley, oats).

Revenue

Roughly 10% of producers net less than \$2,500 per year. About 50% net between \$2,500 and \$50,000. Twenty-five percent net between \$100,000 and \$500,000. And the net revenue of the remaining 15% is distributed throughout in small blocks of 2 to 5%.

Farm Hiring and Farm Labor Shortages



Producer Observations Regarding Labor Shortages

Cannot find US citizens willing to perform farm labor, and the candidates that become available have drug problems and are not reliable.	As a non-profit, we are limited to hiring temporary employees and not seasonal employees.
Hard to find folks	Sales persons
Even for a few weeks every summer it has been hard to find people/teens to work in the hay field.	much fewer applications than in years past
Can not find people to work for minimum wage doing manual labor (fence building, filling feeder...)	We always seem to be short something
hard to find people to work	Hard to find
Limited labor pool, cost	Lack of skilled laborers
Sales positions	Hard to find workers
I have hired and folks don't show up at all, they quit after a short time, or they do work but move on to something else after a season.	Lack of interested workers, inability to compete with other industry wages (construction)
Workers seem unwilling to travel for the work in recent years	Nobody wants to perform physical labor
There is no longer a pool of labors to hire from.	Not last year but for the years prior yes
Though we only hire a few employees, it is hard to find qualified personnel.	

The 20% of farms that reported no labor shortages variously cited ready availability of applicants, access to labor from friends and family, and husband/wife labor team as adequate.

Source of Labor Shortage

The top five causes of farm labor shortages according to respondents were:

1. Farm work is seasonal, not year-round (19%)
2. Dis-interest in the industry (15%)
3. Lack of competitive wages (15%)
4. Difficulty finding qualified applicants (14%)
5. Shifts in job-seeker expectations, and Lack of career opportunity (10% each)

Minor contributions were attributed to COVID-19 (3%), desire for flexible work (4%) and other (9%), noted below.

“Other” Reasons Cited by 9% for Labor Shortages, Noted as Following

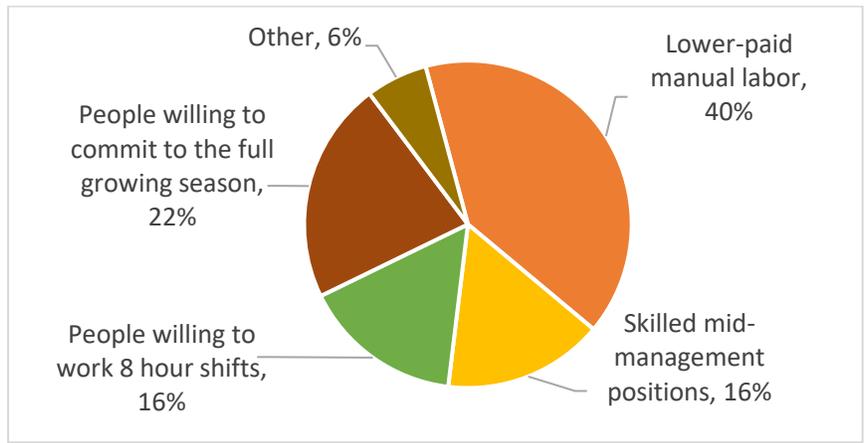
(A small portion of respondents expressed these pointed frustrations)

A failed US migrant worker program	Limited organizational policies and funds
Very part-time and very temporary	Current generation does not want to work, just take handouts
Minimum wage is too high creating an expectation that even the lowest skilled work should be paid higher	It's expensive and farming doesn't make much money
People do not want to do the manual field work	Most want full time hours
People make more doing nothing these days or can make the same wage flipping a cheeseburger	Immigration issues
Seasonal and farmers can't afford to pay	People are lazy
Funding and resources	Living expenses are too high (especially when being a seasonal employee)

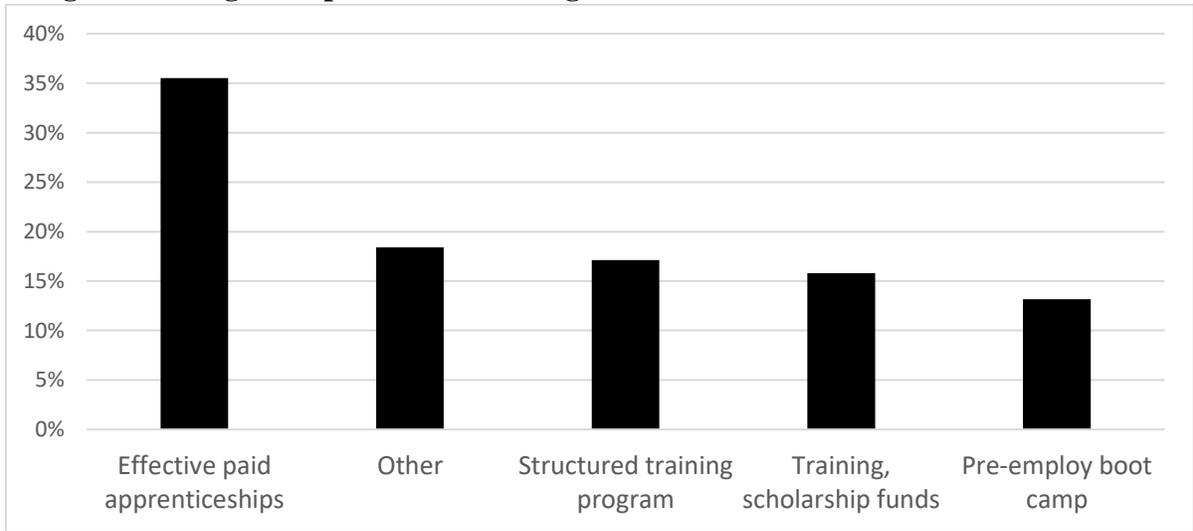
Skills that Respondents Felt Prospective Employees Most Lack

Reliability	18.4%
Work ethic	17.3%
Experience	15.1%
Ability to withstand rigors of the job	14.5%
Efficiency	8.4%
Foreknowledge of what the job entails	7.8%
Commitment to a full season's work	8.9%
Training	3.9%
Other	3.4%
Farm appropriate gear and supplies	2.2%

Types or Skill-Levels Most Difficult to Obtain Among Agricultural Workers



Strategies that Might Help Address Lacking Skills

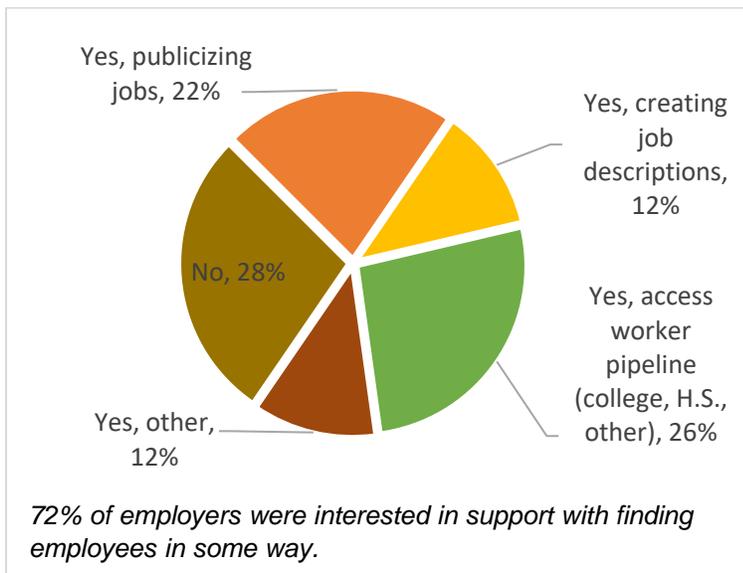


'Structured trainings' referred to training in basic skills, knowledge, and/or credentials. Comments on 'other' described below in "notable themes".

Notable themes Regarding Training to Address Limited Skills:

1. Programs should be developed to train/apprentice, “...we have had great young people including WWOOFERS”, etc.
2. Our ability to cultivate and supply domestic farm labor is culturally broken and it can’t be fixed
3. We need structural/systemic funding (or change) to support the farm labor pipeline, there “...is an obvious disconnect”
4. We need to improve systems (visa, etc) to bring in workers from elsewhere

Interest in Assistance with Finding Employees

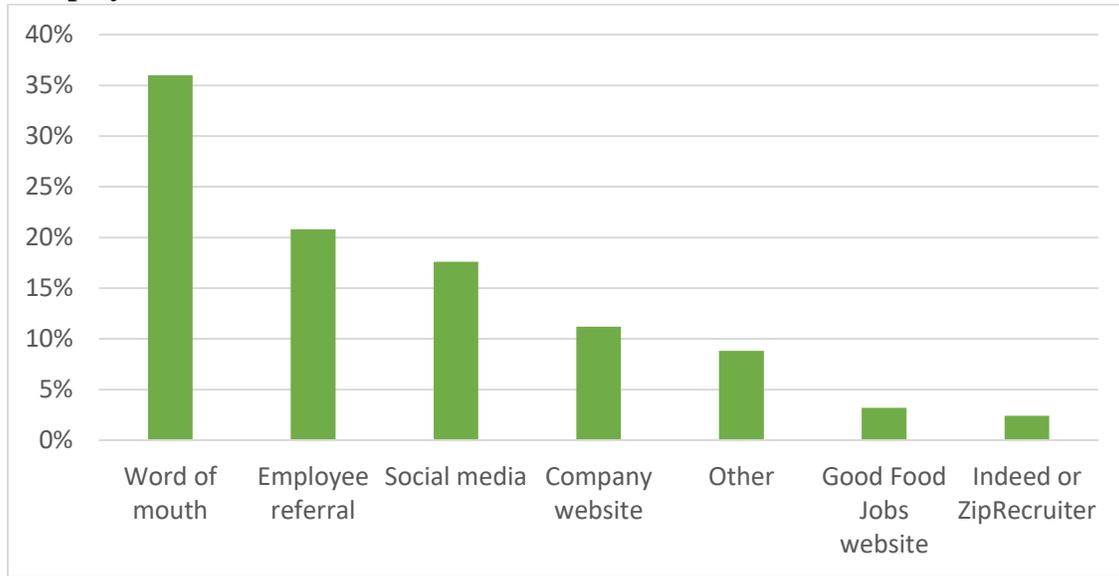


One notable comment was that some farms could be interested in funding to host educational agriculture trainings, if it meant it would improve their access to a qualified labor pool. This would locate trainings where they are most effective, and position employers to provide the most relevant training.

One respondent commented that farm labor issues could be addressed systematically through:

“...federal/state incentivized and subsidized small farm funds for hiring and job training rolled out in a similar fashion to the WSDA Local Food Purchasing program, but instead of food security, utilizing workforce development partners and the services of local NGO/Non-Profits. That way you build a natural workforce that matches each area's farm industry needs and take the economic risk away from small farms to train employees new to the workforce.”

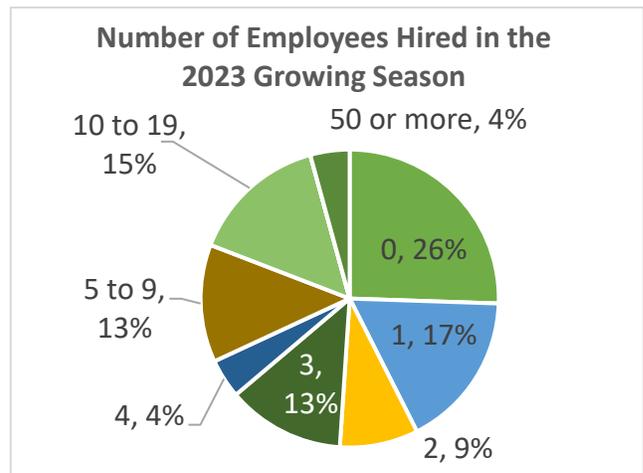
How Employers Find Farm Workers



General and 'other' comments included: some able to fill needs using the dysfunctional H2A Visa program; contact agencies (I cannot afford a full time exposure to L&I premiums for hiring out two weeks a year); labor contractor; networking with other farmers; Farmers' Market, WWOOFers; notices on local bulletin boards (multiple noted this approach); Urban Ag H.S. Programs, Seasonal Internships, Academic Internships; craigslist

On Hiring/Employing Farm Workers

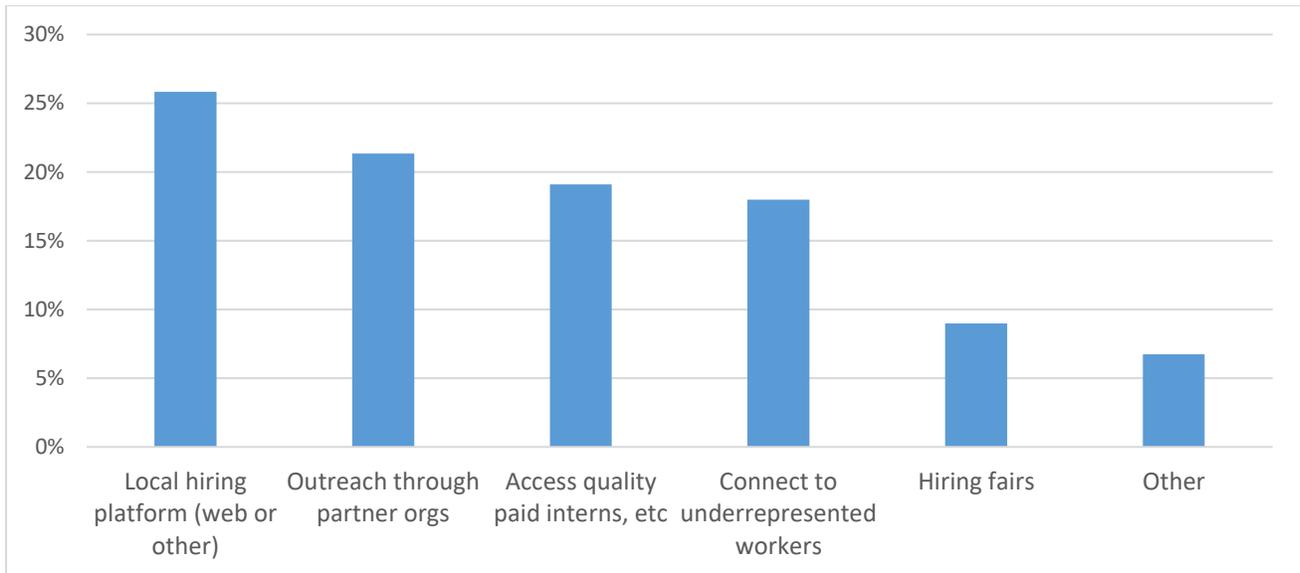
- The biggest single block (26%) of farms employed no workers in 2023. An equal amount (26%) hired between 2 and 4 employees, and another 26% block hired between 5 and 15 workers.
- No respondents employed between 20 and 49 workers, and two employed 50 workers or more.
- ***Notably, 75% of respondents who did not hire in 2023 expected to do so in 2024, citing a need to hire workers to expand production***



Need for Farm Workers

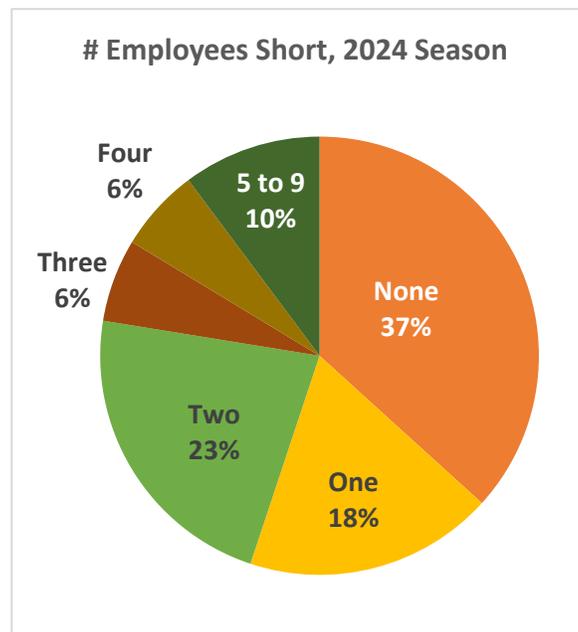
- Among respondents, between 40 and 50% cited a shortage of one to three workers in 2023. Another 15% block cited a shortage of 5-9 workers, which in combination with other data reveals a kind of rough bimodal distribution (or two pools) of farm business sizes in the region: small-ish to medium on the one hand, large(r) on the other.

Additional Support Needs for Hiring/Accessing Qualified Workers

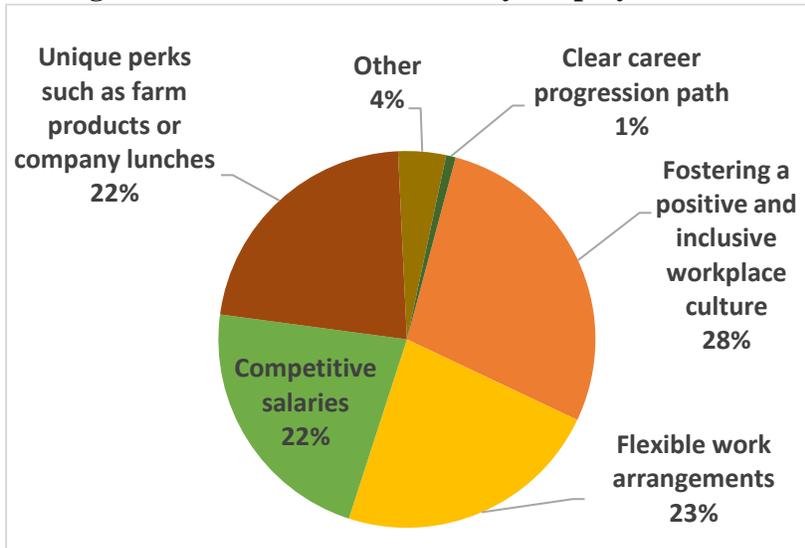


Farm Labor and Succession Planning

- 82% of employers noted that hiring an employee is (43%) or might be (41%) part of their farm succession plan
- 16% said hiring is not part of their farm succession plan
- Hiring apparently plays a significant role in farm succession planning, which may be due to an aging farm population and continuing turnover of farmland
- Some farm owners mention they want to work with family first, and others that they are always on the lookout for when a good employee comes along



Strategies Used to Retain Workers by Employers



We treat everyone with respect as a valued member of the company and focus on teamwork.

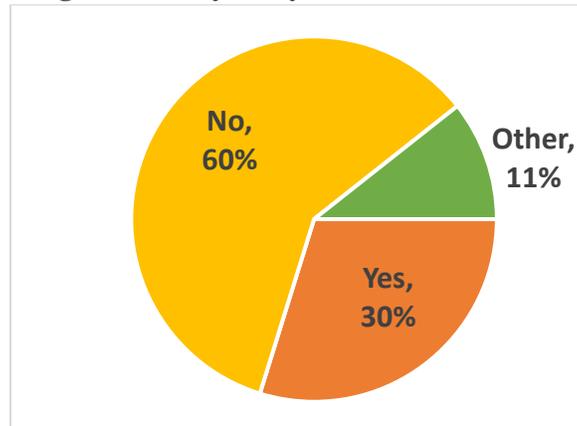
Everyone works together to accomplish the work while accommodating each employees' abilities/ needs as much as possible.

We build a culture of family where we work and celebrate together and they see their job as integral to the success of the whole farm.

Some Miscellaneous Comments Offered by Employers Included:

- Help with drug pre-screening of applicants would be useful
- Need to review the overtime labor law

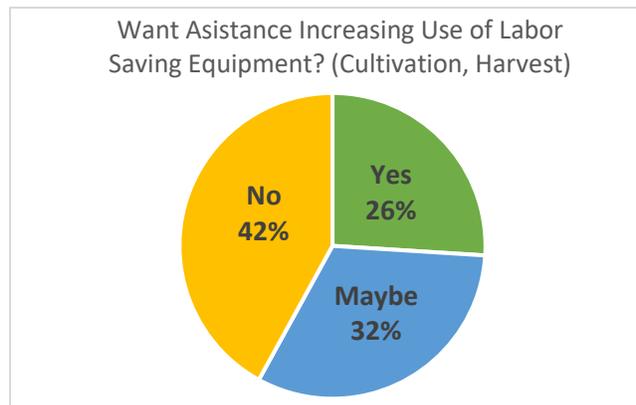
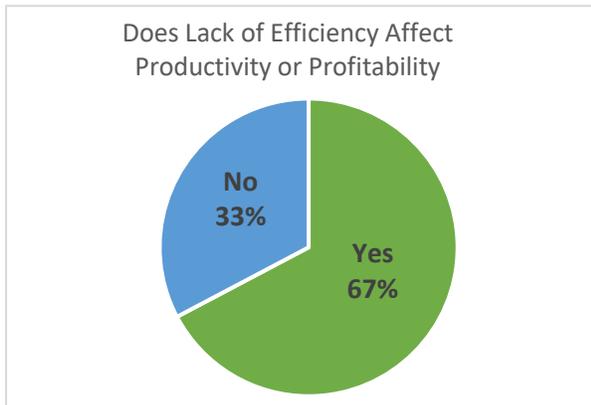
Whether Farms Have Changed the Way They Sell Products Due to Lack of Employees



Nearly one-third of farms have changed the way they sell products due to lack of employees.

How Farm Sales Strategies Have Changed Due to Labor Shortages

We used to break down cluster oysters into singles and sell them direct to distributor/ consumers ourselves. Due to lack of labor we now sell all oysters wholesale, greatly reducing profit. Also, we would love to expand into value-added products, retail, direct-to-consumer, but if you can't even keep the farm running with existing labor how do you expand?	When an employee quit early season, I did the sales at the local farmer's market which means I wasn't working the land. I have opportunities I can't pursue because I am not staffed and can't fill the contract.
Changed what we are growing with the unavailability of seasonal labor	Two years ago we lost an entire acre ready for harvest due to crew not coming out on the needed days.
Not being able to get vegetables harvested	Sell from home no longer do farmers market
Attending less markets	We stopped farming some items
All sales are handled by managing partners.	Scaled back our farmer market schedule and crop plan.
Cut delivery days per week	Ended our CSA and dropped some farmers markets and less wholesale

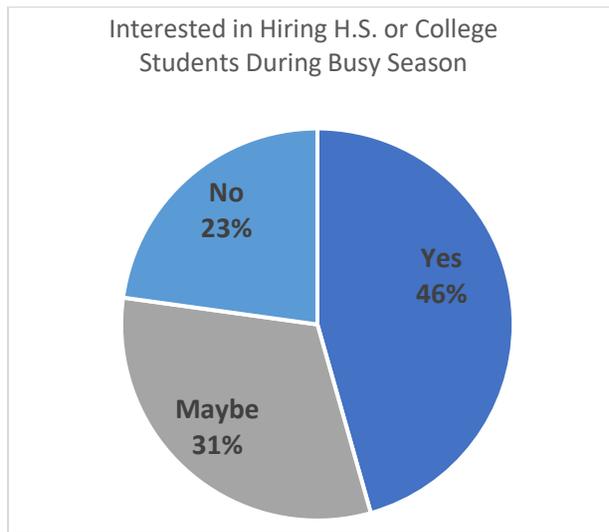
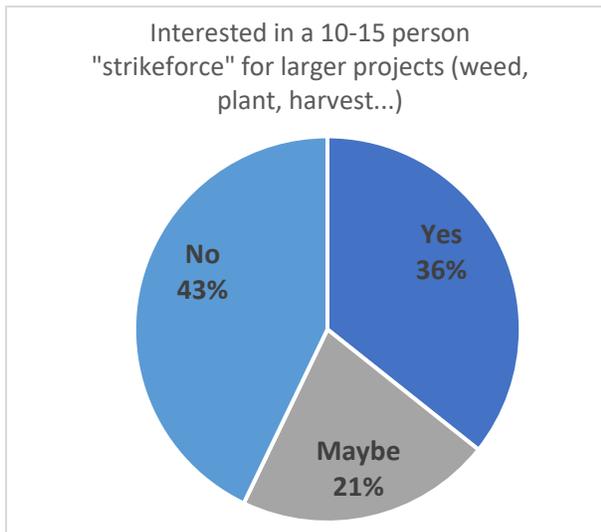


Comments on Labor-Saving Support

A more modern de-vining table in part of my future plans	machinery to process fresh cranberries.
We could always learn more about using different tractor mounted cultivation tools to reduce manual labor needs.	Need a usda kill/processor in Thurston County to streamline harvest, allow product to be sold locally, and cut down on costs associated with transport and harvest
I'd like to be able to afford mechanical harvesting equipment to rely less on labor.	We wear a lot of hats around here, any help offered is wonderful.
weed suppression	More automation of irrigation
Berry harvesters, rototillers	Harvest cleaners/packers
Larger cider press	Automated irrigation and efficient drip

We would like to expand into processing our own oysters and better post-harvest handling of our clams for more direct to consumer sales	I'm not sure what is out there in terms of increasing efficiency so I can't state what type.
Could be helpful to have additional training for seasonal workers.	Have to work with tides
Small processing equipment to value-add	Post harvest, tractors, etc.
We already utilize all of them	

Potential of Expanding Innovative “Work Crew” and Student Season Work Opportunities



Comments

We used to do this.	June-July
typically need 4-6 people during haying season and one or two occasionally throughout the year.	Strike force yes! We want schools to have their own 2500 sq ft plot to learn to grow and donate to food banks
Yes!!!!	We have tried but no one knows how to work.

Regarding Interest in Internships and Apprenticeships

- 14% of respondents host interns on their farms
- 86% do not host interns on their farms
- **69% of respondents are (28%) or might be (41%) interested in paid apprenticeships**, while 41% are a ‘maybe’ and 28% not interested
- **63% of respondents are (30%) or might be (33%) interested in a conversation around an apprenticeship program**, while 37% are not

Comments

Would need significant funding assistance as minimum wage is too high	I need information on what this refers to. If it's what I think, I could move forward on that now
Funding needed A solid contact with host organization/school. We had a paid intern from Avanti in 2023 and will have one again in 2024	In a future year We can undertake all training and onsite management, it's just funds that we lack to hire more folks
Finding the people	Need funding to do so
If it was funded for sure and we could donate food to Thurston County food bank or schools	Need the framework to support an intern - it can be a lot of work managing interns without the supporting framework in place
Define work period and availability	It would depend on the time of year
Assistance with the salary and an intense screening process	They would need to be bilingual and then it just depends on the conditions of that arrangement and the person
Need an adult, not a child	

For instances in which the experience did not go well, expectations around pay were cited.

Final Employer Comments

- I have an independent bog and need very specific equipment to process the berries. This equipment is expensive and difficult to even find due to its specialty.
- Minimum wage is too high in Washington State. Overtime rules are too strict in Washington.
- Minimum wage being over \$16 an hour is one of the major problems.
- Again, most the issues we have dealt with are the post COVID societal push toward entitlement and disengagement from the workforce.
- My grandmother in-law had orchards in Eastern Washington. She talked about seasonal labor progressing from family and kids, to full-time moms and kids, to hippies and kids, to Mexican migrants (the true meaning of migrant not the current political usage) and fewer kids, to migrant labor and no kids, to H2 or no labor. They are selling out this year. We changed crops grown 10 years ago due to inability to find any seasonal labor. Last good crew was sober work-release crew!
- With the wages so high we cannot pay good/exceptional employees what they are worth.
- We are a small farm - a husband and wife team, both in our seventies. We are not ready to retire the farm because we need the income, but we don't make enough money to justify hiring and training someone.
- All good
- In our experience young people today do not know how to work and are not really interested in doing so. Not sure how one fixes that.
- Unable due to economic issues to work full time on my farm and have to work off-site.
- The short farming season makes it hard to have return experienced employees.

- In the shellfish industry we work day and night with the tidal cycles. New laws have slowed production due to shorter times to harvest, new licensing fees are going up 600%.
- Would love to retain hard-working and skilled employees with subsidized competitive wages.
- Thank you for the great survey, I really admire all land-grant/extension state ag programs. I went to both USU and OSU and the work y'all are doing is crucial.
- Lots of our projects are infrastructure. We can handle the day-to-day, but getting some help with projects like fencing and weed abatement would be helpful.
- Land is taxed to the max and there are no breaks for the small farmer. Washington is NOT supportive of us farmers.
- On small family farms, I see the bigger issues being: 1) lack of irrigation, 2) areas of water rationing, 3) crops that would benefit from protection in high tunnels or greenhouses, and 4) inability to protect your crops from potential chemicals a neighbor is spraying on their crops (aerial, as well as water run-off).