

## **North Branch Farm Labor Model Diagnosis**

### **USDA SARE Grant**

December 6, 2014

**Problem:** North Branch Farm's labor model has proved inefficient to meet the farm's labor needs and is therefore going to be revised under this Labor Case Study Project as part of the work Healthy Acadia is doing, in partnership with UMaine Cooperative Extension and CYON Business Solutions, under the USDA SARE Grant, to support local farms in Hancock County to engage in resource-based sustainable growth processes.

### **Labor Model Description**

North Branch Farm is a family owned farm that shares management roles between four family members, and two family units, who maintain distinct division of labor, based on the farm's diversified nature, but have shared labor.

Up until now the farm management team, comprised of Elsie&Tyler, Seth&Anna, have traditionally hired two full-time seasonal apprentices from the MOFGA program to assist in all areas of the farm interchangeably.

The farm areas are mainly Vegetables, Nursery, Dairy and Woods Work.

### **Apprentice Model - 2014**

*Problem* - North Branch Farm is mainly horsepowered, which attracts the attention of people who are looking to gain experience with horses, but who are not necessarily ready to provide the farm with the kind of help needed, which is usually doing the work that the horses can't do. This created a conflict of interests.

*Quote* - "Horsepower is on the rise, but we want people that want to be on a vegetable farm and have interaction with the horses but not expect to lead the horse teams. Lately we have found our horses are learning bad habits."

*Recommendation* - Based on other farm labor model analysis looking at the apprentice hiring process, we recommend not promoting the horsepower as a draw for apprentices, or other hiring processes but clarifying that there will be specific days for horsepower involvement to motivate the workforce, but that mainly the farm needs vegetable farmers. Other skills are a bonus, and previous knowledge is a bonus, but better yet work ethic and self-motivation are differentiating criteria.

*Conclusion* - Managing the horsepower attraction is important. Advertising as a horsepower farm can lead to some people having misleading expectations and misunderstanding what is to be expected of them.

## **Hired Labor - 2015**

*Problem* – The reaction to having had a difficult time with apprentices has shifted the management's perspective to wanting to hire two workers to fill the place of the two apprentices, and have a break from the teaching responsibility that might be holding back some of the strategic growth that North Branch is looking to achieve in the next year. It is still unclear where this investment is going to come from, and how each area of the farm is going to participate in solving it. There is a possibility of following other farm labor models and ending up down the road with a mixed model of hired help and apprentices on the farm.

*Quote* – “For next year we are just going to have two paid workers. We still don't know how we are going to pay for this”

*Recommendation* – Taking the pressure off the farm's management to have to take a teaching approach to managing on-farm labor, and substituting this with hard labor to meet the farm's needs seems like a good approach. However, there may be ways to design the labor model so it isn't just placing hard labor in the place of the apprentices, but taking the learning of what was an inefficient labor model to apply a new creative model to best meet the specific needs of the different business areas of the farm: Vegetable Production, Dairy House Construction, Nursery Grafting, and Woods Work. This strategy can help the farm more efficiently manage the investment in hard labor, based on what business area of the farm it is going to benefit in each season and what specialized labor might best fit each need. Furthermore, workman's comp for workers needs to be explored.

*Conclusion* – Each area of the farm has different labor needs but the estimated pay rate falls between \$15-\$18/hr.

**Vegetable Production** - The 2,25 acres of vegetables will most likely take up 65% of the total investment in labor. While it may seem logical to farm management that labor hours be put towards delicate jobs such as planting seedlings, and increasing efficiency of transplanting, the work that might need the most hard labor is hand weeding, and the other more specialized work can most efficiently be done by a management team. This can lead to important conversations and increase efficiency of overall management.

**Nursery Grafting** – Mostly of the labor that is needed in the Nursery during 1 month out of the year (April (bench grafting) – August (bud grafting)) taking up 10% of the total investment in labor. This could mean that in April and August someone is brought in to help with grafting, or it can mean that it

is incorporated into another area of the farm's job description. The latter option requires negotiation with that area of the farm to ensure that no conflicts of interest arise within the overall farm management.

**Diary House Building** – The construction of a new building is going to require that a semi-independent team of carpenters led by Tyler and Seth, will maintain a consistent work schedule and timeline, taking 20% of the total investment in labor. These workers will have to have carpentry skills, working on the multi-purpose processing farm building which is going to house all the different rooms for the cheese making, the cave, cider pressing, two walk-in coolers, a small walk-in freezer and two 500ft<sup>2</sup> apartments.

**Woods Work** – North Branch Farm has been given a grant to maintain the woods on their farm property and so there will be a need to designate 5% of the total investment in labor to woods work. This could ideally be combined with the carpentry job description, as usually there are some shared areas of expertise between woods work and carpentry that can benefit the bottom-line of the building project and increase the labor model's efficiency.

**All employees and management team** who are receiving food and lodging benefits must be comfortable working into their schedule farm chores, occasional fencing work, and recurring pasturing of animals.

**Investment in hard labor can be subsidized** through partnership with non-profit staff dedicated to local food systems, students at technical schools, community-service programs, and volunteer programs such as UMaine Cooperative Extension's Master Gardener programs, farm-labor-exchange programs or community events during harvest times.

\* This diagnosis as been created to best serve North Branch Farm in their ongoing process of improving their labor model. Three other Labor Case Studies have been presented alongside this document to provide insight into other farm management strategies.