

# Creating a fair and sustainable farm labor force

By Jacob Taylor

For many small- and medium-scale growers, it is the love of the craft and art of farming that keeps them in the work despite financial pressures and difficult conditions. Many folks choose to keep farming because it is life-affirming, humane work. There is beauty and deep satisfaction in working with the land to bring forth food to nourish our loved ones and communities, all the while regenerating soil, sequestering carbon, and strengthening the local foodshed.

But we must consider whether we can rightly use the term “sustainable” to describe the arrangement which does not allow farmers and farm laborers to support themselves and a family in modest comfort. Social equity for farmers and farmworkers is too often overlooked, but it is an essential part of a truly sustainable, regenerative food and farm system. We need what Margaret Gray calls in her book *Labor and the Locavore* a “comprehensive food ethic” which encompasses all the ecological and social relations, from soil to farmhand, to farmer, to retailer, to eater, and maximizes justice and equity between them.

Despite the importance of social relations on farms, there has been little investment in outreach and education in this critical topic in the North Central Region. Labor issues have received some attention, though it is typically focused on increasing management control and efficiency. To respond to the need for increased social equity in our local food and farm systems, Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association’s new Fair Farms Program works in collaboration with the Agricultural Justice Project to tend to the interlocking concerns of fair wages and labor standards for farmworkers, and fair pricing for farmers. By supplying free help and educational opportunities around these issues for family-scale farmers through a recent NCR-SARE grant, this program contributes to a more socially just and resilient food system.

The Fair Farms Program works from a recognition that many small- and medium-sized famers are committed to sustainability principles and aspire to pay better wages and uphold fair labor standards. However, many, if not most, of these operations find themselves balancing season after season on a tightrope of financial pressure as they try to make ends meet with tiny margins, increasing debt, and a highly unstable work force. Farmers have trouble keeping workers, covering costs of production, and

many cannot, or do not, pay themselves a living wage. Farmworkers are compensated little for their labor on the farm and are often subjected to dangerous working conditions without significant legal protections.

Our goal is to equip farmers with the resources they need to achieve actual social and financial sustainability. These resources might include guidance on optimum pricing of farm products, and strategies for increasing revenues, as well as methods for calculating living wages. We can suggest ways to diversify products and extend the working season to make jobs more attractive. Templates for creating clear written labor policies, safety plans, and training protocols are also important resources.

By providing farmers with knowledge and tools that bring about greater equity, we foster development of a skilled and stable workforce, more able to contribute to the long-term sustainability of farms.

We believe that fair labor practices benefit everyone. Farmworkers are treated and compensated well and are more likely to return season after season, not only for love of the work but because it offers financial stability and a potentially viable career path. Farmers have the advantage of a well-trained work force, which enhances productivity, care for the environment, and the long-term resilience of the farm. Having fair labor standards in place also provides eaters with the satisfaction of knowing the people who grew their food received a just compensation for their work and were treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.

Receiving this support from OEFFA is simple. When a farmer fills out our short self-assessment on labor and pricing standards, and sends us any written documentation they have on employment policies, we send back an individualized report with resources to help strengthen their commitment to social integrity. Those resources include ready-to-adapt templates and excellent model policies and procedures on:

- Creating a thorough employee handbook and farm health and safety plan
- Calculating full production costs and living wages, fair pricing, and negotiating with buyers
- Working through grievances and conflicts on the farm
- Creating learning programs, and working with interns and apprentices
- Implementing on-boarding, and employee evaluation forms

## Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association offers free labor and pricing help to farmers in the North Central Region

This program supports farmers in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. Receiving support is easy: fill out our 30-minute self-assessment on labor and pricing standards and send any written employment policies your farm uses. We’ll send back an individualized report with resources to help strengthen your farm’s commitment to social integrity. Those resources include ready-to-adapt templates and excellent model policies and procedures for an employee handbook, farm health and safety plan, ways to calculate full production costs, and more. Take the self-assessment at [www.surveymonkey.com/r/fairfarms](http://www.surveymonkey.com/r/fairfarms)

To provide the best support, we work with farms one-on-one and carefully consider their specific context and needs to produce a personalized report at no cost to the farmer. Many of the resources we’re able to supply have been developed over the past twenty years through the Agricultural Justice Project’s efforts to transform the existing agricultural system through education and their Food Justice Certification. Their stakeholder-driven certification is considered the gold standard for domestic fair trade for farm products, and their wealth of time-tested resources help equip farmers to implement food justice principles in their operations.

In addition to providing this technical assistance, we are also offering a series of educational events taught by farmers. These events dig deeper into many of these topics—moving from legal to fair employment, creating a health and safety plan, improving

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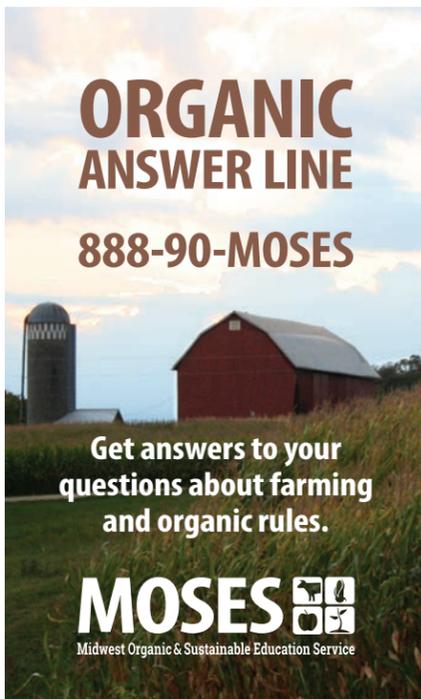
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our individualist capitalist framework. These include indigenous approaches to land use and food production, and groups that are trying to maintain or re-establish them; historical Black southern cooperative farms; and what she terms “Big Team Farms,” where enterprises are stacked and a collective of farmers support one another. These provide hopeful examples of where we could go. It made me think of some of MOSES’s recent honorees, who are actively developing Big Team Farms in one way or another.

Meanwhile, farm ownership is becoming increasingly consolidated. The recent trend of financialization of farmland drives investors to see farmland only for its potential return, focusing solely on market efficiency. Corporate ownership, too, prioritizes maximum cash flow over stewardship of land, well-being of farmworkers, and viability of rural communities.

That’s the opposite of collectivism, and at the end of the book I was left wondering how we get from here to there. The author may be right that small family farms are not the future we want to work toward, but if we don’t stanch the bleeding, it may prove impossible to establish Big Team Farms when all our acres are tied up in corporations and investments.

*Rachel Henderson is a MOSES Organic Specialist. She owns and operates Mary Dirty Face Farm near Menomonie, Wisconsin, with her husband, Anton.*



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racist systems of oppression, that advance inequity within communities of color. I believe that relationship building is the foundation that allows for effective engagement and communication that will help break down the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ structures that have plagued state governments and many institutions for decades,” says Lillian.

Minnesota’s first agriculture-themed license plate, which uses imagery representing diversity, enhances public visibility of the state’s outreach to new and emerging farmers. “We’re excited to have this new license plate that highlights the diversity of Minnesota’s ag economy,” Thom Petersen,

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calculation of costs of production, designing and implementing intern training programs, and more. Our first event this past January—a course “teaser” with farm consultant Ellen Polishuk of Plant to Profit—began a conversation on calculating costs of production and establishing fair prices for farm products so that labor compensation can be increased. This session plus another on March 7 will culminate in a multi-part course next winter which will take a deep dive into calculating the full costs of production including living wages, enabling farmers to analyze where and how margins can be increased.

Created by farmers for farmers, the programs in this series are practical and interactive, designed to equip growers with content and tools that can be applied to their operations.

Finally, one of our goals with the Fair Farms Program is to foster a diverse learning community and network made up of farmers, farmworkers, domestic fair trade and workers’ organizations, and eaters, to encourage ongoing collaboration in the work of bringing about a more socially just and sustainable food and farm system.

We recognize that there are many structural impediments to justice in our food systems: ongoing consolidation of agricultural power in the hands of corporations who do not have our communities’ best interests in mind, exploitation of low wage and migrant workers, and racialized environmental injustice and exclusion from healthy and affordable food. We need many voices at the table from a multitude of vantage points to share their experiences and their expertise at the intersections of issues like labor, fair

Commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture says. “This is an opportunity for Minnesotans to show their commitment to agriculture while supporting our young leaders in FFA and 4-H.”

Patrice adds, “The plate demonstrates that agriculture is welcoming to everyone. As more diverse farmers are emerging and looking for entry points into agriculture, stating that agriculture is for all is important.”

*Patrice Bailey is the Assistant Commissioner at the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, where Lillian Otieno serves as the Emerging Farmer Outreach and Engagement Coordinator.*

trade, and sustainable agriculture in order to build a more just and resilient farm system together.

The need for more small- and medium-scale farms committed to feeding our communities, honoring the land, and strengthening the local foodshed can hardly be understated. But for sustainable farms to grow and thrive, the issue of social sustainability must be as integral as environmental sustainability. All who labor to feed us season after season with healthy, nourishing food should not have to sacrifice financial sustainability for themselves and their families in order to keep their operations afloat. Farm work could be a viable and attractive career choice for up-and-comers not only because it is noble work, but because it could sustain those who provide labor on farms.

By focusing on the joint concerns of fair pay and labor standards for farmworkers and fair pricing for farmers, OEFFA’s Fair Farms Program contributes to the realization of this kind of comprehensive food ethic in our region. As this project gets off the ground, we invite all who labor on farms in the North Central Region to join us in this work. Stay connected with Fair Farms programming on OEFFA’s website and reach out to receive free technical assistance.

Find Fair Farms Program events at [www.oeffa.org/events](http://www.oeffa.org/events)

Learn more about the Agricultural Justice Project at [www.agriculturaljusticeproject.org](http://www.agriculturaljusticeproject.org)

Take our Self-Assessment on Labor and Pricing Standards at [www.surveymonkey.com/r/fairfarms](http://www.surveymonkey.com/r/fairfarms)

*Jacob Taylor is the OEFFA Fair Farms Program Coordinator. Email [jacob@oeffa.org](mailto:jacob@oeffa.org) for more information on the Fair Farms Program.*



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