


California Institute for Rural Studies
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 Suite 204
 Davis, CA
 530.756.6555 v
 530.756.7429 f
 www.cirsinc.org


Keeping workers happy & production profitable:

Best Practices in Farm Labor Management



photo by Bill Gillette

Erin Hardie
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What is CIRS?

- ◆ Non-profit research group since 1977
- ◆ Focus on the three E's of sustainable agricultural development: Environment, Economy, **Equity**.
- ◆ Range of research topics: immigration reform, immigrant civic participation, labor law, rural health, pesticide use, and water policy.


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Why Research on Best Practices?

- ◆ Increased **consumer interest** in social issues in sustainable agriculture
- ◆ Increased need to **attract and retain a stable workforce**
- ◆ Many growers have expressed interest in improving labor conditions, but:
 - Don't think they can afford to
 - Don't know what's most important to employees


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Best Practices Research Goals

- ◆ Find out what labor practices create a "win-win" situation with **benefits for both employers and employees**
- ◆ Create a "road map" for growers interested in improving labor conditions


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Research Methods

- ◆ Case study approach – 12 farms with reputation for good labor practices
 - Diverse mix: size, crops, location
 - One vineyard management company
- ◆ Site visits on 10 farms
- ◆ Interviews with farmers and farm managers
- ◆ Focus groups with > 100 employees


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Overarching Findings

It **IS** possible to implement labor practices that:

1. Benefit employees
2. Benefit employers by reducing costs and improving productivity
3. Open doors to new market opportunities for products grown on farms with fair labor practices

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Summary of Best Practices



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Respectful Treatment

"Before, I worked with a contractor and I was treated badly. Here there are policies. No one says anything in a mean way. They say 'passa.' That means a lot. When you are happy you work more."

- ◆ Respectful communication styles
- ◆ Humane pace of work
- ◆ Personal relationships between growers and employees
- ◆ Freedom - to stretch, use bathroom, listen to music, talk to one another

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Compensation

"We work harder here, because we know that if the farm does well, we do well. At the end of the year, there are bonuses. Other places I've worked don't have bonuses."

"We do (profit-sharing) because it's the right thing to do. They work hard and they deserve it. It also has a huge impact on morale, productivity and retention. I don't think they'd want to work here if they didn't get their bonus."

- ◆ Living wage
 - Few offer, yet other benefits contribute to higher income
- ◆ Profit-sharing
 - Important motivator and risk management strategy
- ◆ Raises
- ◆ Innovative strategies – e.g., food baskets

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Year-Round Employment

"We provide year-round employment. That's huge. It means that our workers can live here with their families. Families go to school here. Kids learn English. They are part of the community now."

- ◆ Diversified, labor intensive nature of sustainable agriculture → year-round employment
- ◆ Winter cropping schemes
- ◆ Jobs on farm in winter – repairs, painting
- ◆ Labor-sharing
 - e.g., contract with olive grove in winter

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Traditional Benefits

"It's a commitment of ours to help folks find housing. When anything is available, we snap it up. We sign a lease. We make sure the rent gets paid, even when there aren't workers there."


- ◆ Health insurance – workers and families
- ◆ Subsidized housing
- ◆ Paid time off – holidays, vacations
- ◆ Retirement plans
- ◆ Life insurance
- ◆ Equitable access – employees get same benefits as vineyard president

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Non-Traditional Benefits

"You can bring home all the food you want. We're eating a lot of vegetables. We all have more to eat."

- ◆ Personal loans
- ◆ Food from the farm
- ◆ Assistance with social services, legal issues, citizenship
- ◆ Educational assistance
 - Ag-related higher education for workers
 - Assistance with children's education



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Health and Safety

"The highest and most important product of the farm is the workers' health, safety and happiness."

- ◆ Lack of pesticide exposure
- ◆ Hand-weeding limitations
- ◆ Diverse tasks → less repetitive stress
- ◆ Hourly wages to promote slower pace
- ◆ Team-work → greater safety
- ◆ Prompt/adequate medical attention in case of accidents/injuries
- ◆ "Light duty" without repercussions




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Labor Relations, Communications and Decision Making

"Here you speak up if you have a concern. I told the foreman that I don't want to have to bring tools to work each day -- that they should be on site. I would never have said that on another farm. You could get fired for that."

- ◆ Staff meetings
 - Information sharing
 - Employee feedback and input
- ◆ Grievance procedures
 - Open door policies
- ◆ Formalized policies and employee manuals
- ◆ Collective bargaining, UFW contract



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Management Structures

"I really like working with the team I'm in. Everyone cares about each other. It's a team effort. Everyone helps train you and shows you how to do things."


- ◆ Team-based approach
- ◆ No foremen on several farms
 - Cost savings for growers
 - Workers appreciate absence of foremen tremendously
- ◆ Growers work alongside employees, many speak Spanish



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Recruitment and Farm Labor Contractors

- ◆ Mostly direct hiring and employment
- ◆ Recruitment through current workers → more cohesive workforce
- ◆ Limited use of farm labor contractors
 - Above minimum wage negotiated
 - Oversight to ensure safe, respectful conditions
 - FLCs with good reputations re: labor hired



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Diversity of Tasks

"It's not boring on the farm. Sometimes I have five or six tasks in a day. There are so many different tasks here that you learn about many aspects of the farm. The work changes all the time and time goes by more quickly."

- ◆ Diversified production → more diverse work
- ◆ Less boredom, monotony, tedium
- ◆ Less repetitive stress
- ◆ Opportunities for learning about a broad range of crops



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Professional Development and Advancement

"We learn many things that we haven't done before. There are so many different vegetables. My compañeros teach me. In other places they don't take the time to teach you."

- ◆ Opportunities for on-the-job training
- ◆ Attempts to promote from within – managerial and technical positions
 - Challenges re: employee reluctance to supervise friends and family

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Opportunities for Older Workers

- ◆ High retention rates → aging workforce
- ◆ Older workers kept on – suitable tasks found for them
- ◆ Grower concerns re: reconciling aging workforce and physical demands of farming

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What Employees Most Value

- ◆ Respectful treatment
- ◆ Slower pace of work
- ◆ Fair compensation
- ◆ Year-round work
- ◆ Health insurance
- ◆ Personal loans
- ◆ Food from the farm
- ◆ Paid time off
- ◆ Flexible schedule
- ◆ Safe/healthy workplace
- ◆ Housing
- ◆ Opportunities for advancement
- ◆ Diversity of tasks
- ◆ Involvement in decision-making processes
- ◆ Clear and effective grievance procedures

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Benefits for Growers

Workers want two things: respect and fair compensation. When you give them that it leads to higher quality work and higher quality produce.

A more satisfied, motivated and knowledgeable workforce results in:

- ◆ Higher retention rates → fewer labor shortages
- ◆ Reduced training and supervision costs
- ◆ Higher quality products → access to niche markets
- ◆ Year-round market retention
- ◆ Higher revenues

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Overcoming Cost Barriers: Low Cost Practices

- ◆ Respectful treatment
- ◆ Appreciation and acknowledgement
- ◆ Food from the farm
- ◆ Personal loans
- ◆ Documented communication policies and grievance procedures
- ◆ Flexible work schedules and task diversification
- ◆ Safe and healthy work environment
- ◆ Team management

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New Market Opportunities

- ◆ Social Certification
 - Most rapid growth in Europe: IFOAM, SASA
 - Food Alliance
- ◆ Institutional Purchasing
 - UC System Sustainable Food Campaign
 - Kaiser Permanente (Food Policy)
 - Food Service Operators: Bon Appetit
 - Government procurement (SF Fair Trade and Organic resolution)
- ◆ Demonstration projects
 - RAFI/CATA North American Social Justice Standards

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Conclusions

- ◆ Good labor practices are a “win-win-win” – farmers, employees and agricultural communities
- ◆ Market trends → increased demand for socially just food





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Thanks To

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Contact Information

Erin Hardie
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ehardie@cirsinc.org
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