



# VEGETABLE NEWS *and* VIEWS

FROM THE MICHIGAN VEGETABLE COUNCIL

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1964

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## YOUR MEMBERSHIP

IN THE

MICHIGAN  
VEGETABLE  
COUNCIL

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Thank you for attending the Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable and Farm Market EXPO this past December. Your participation along with more than with 4,000 other attendees, 456 exhibitors, and 165 education program speakers made the 2015 EXPO a tremendous success. The EXPO is co-sponsored by the Michigan Vegetable Council and the Michigan State Horticultural Society. In 2016, we will hold our 16th annual gathering on December 6-8 in Grand Rapids, MI.

As part of your EXPO registration, you receive membership in the Michigan Vegetable Council. While the Council's activities are concentrated in Michigan, we support research and education and advocate on issues important to vegetable growers in Michigan and beyond. About 40% of the Council's current membership is located outside Michigan, particularly in the Great Lakes region including many from Ontario, Canada.

## FUNDING FOR RESEARCH, EXTENSION AND EDUCATION

It is important to know that part of your EXPO registration supports vegetable crop research and extension. The net proceeds from the EXPO, in addition

to providing for the Council's operating expenses, are used primarily for vegetable research and extension grants. For the fiscal year ending March 31, 2016,

these grants by the Council totaled \$55,382. In addition, the Council made research grants of \$89,253 that were funded by the USDA through three Specialty Crop Block Grants, thus increasing total research and extension funding in the past year to \$144,635. For the coming year, the Council has obtained additional Specialty Crop Block Grant funding for projects focused on two

major disease problems – Phytophthora capsici and cucurbit downy mildew.

In cooperation with other industry sponsors, the Council awarded \$10,500 in scholarships at the 2015 EXPO to seven undergrad and graduate students planning careers connected to the vegetable industry. We see this as an important investment in our industry's future.

## THE COUNCIL'S BOARD & STAFF

The Michigan Vegetable Council is directed by a 15-member Board of Directors. Last December, three new directors – Jason Byrd of Benton Harbor, Chris Falak of Fremont, and Adam Van Dyk of Imlay City – were elected to the board. Chris is coming back on the board after being off a year. Joe Pirrone of Capac serves as the Council's President and Doug Horkey of Dundee as Vice President. Dave Smith is the Council's Executive Director and Ben Kudwa serves as Director of External Relations.

## UPDATES ON MSU AND MSUE POSITIONS

### CANR Dean:

Ron Hendrick will become the new Dean of Michigan State's College of Agriculture and Natural Resources (CANR) on July 1. Doug Buhler has been serving as Interim Dean since December when Fred Poston retired from the post. Dr. Hendrick is currently serving as Interim Dean for Ohio State University's College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Science. He is returning to his alma mater having earned his bachelor and doctoral degrees from MSU in forestry and forest ecology.

### MSUE Director:

After serving as Interim Director of MSU Extension (MSUE) since the start of 2016, Jeff Dwyer has been officially named as Director of MSUE. Previously, Dr. Dwyer served as a senior associate dean in the MSU College of Human Medicine with primary responsibilities related to research and community engagement. In-coming CANR Dean, Dr. Ron Hendrick, commented, "Dr. Dwyer has already forged relationships with stakeholder groups across the state and spread the reach of MSU Extension."

### Applied Research and Extension Nematologist:

The Michigan Vegetable Council has joined other agricultural industry organizations to financially support the start-up of an Applied Nematologist position in the Department of Entomology at Michigan State University. This position will be 50% research and 50% extension in the area of applied nematology. This is a fixed term position renewable annually based upon performance and availability of funding. In addition to reporting to the

Chair of the Department of Entomology, the person who fills this position will report to an advisory committee comprised of plant industry representatives who provide funding in support of research and extension efforts.

### Vegetable Extension Educator for Southeast Michigan:

This position has remained unfilled for the past year. Efforts to fill this position continue. The Council's Executive Director is a member of the search committee.

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# IN MEMORY

## OF GORDAN GUYER

Michigan lost a great leader and friend on March 30 when Gordon Guyer passed away at age 89. He contributed in countless ways to the well being of the agricultural and natural resource interests of Michigan in his many and varied leadership roles over the

years. He had an enormous capacity to connect with people and to gain support for good ideas.

Gordon was recognized with the Michigan Vegetable Council's Master Farmer Associate Award back in 1965 for outstanding service to Michigan's vegetable

industry. It is important to remember that his initial work as an entomologist at MSU involved research and extension that addressed vegetable crop insect pests.

Gordon Guyer joined Michigan State University's Department of Entomology in the early 1950's after

completing his Bachelor's, Master's and PhD degrees at MSU. Gordon later served as Chair of the Department of Entomology and as Director of MSU's Pesticide Research Center, which he was instrumental in starting. His leadership qualities eventually led to serving as Director

of MSU Extension, as MSU's Vice President of Governmental Affairs, and as MSU President in 1992-93. Gordon also filled key leadership roles in state government, serving both as Director of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and the Michigan Department of Agriculture.

## VEGETABLE LABOR SURVEY

Recognizing the need to better assess the labor situation facing vegetable growers, the Michigan Vegetable Council commissioned a survey of labor needs and availability for vegetable farms in Michigan. The survey results, which covered the 2014 crop year, were released in late 2015. A summary report on the results and implications of the survey is enclosed with this newsletter.

## MANAGED pollinator PROTECTION PLAN

The first meeting of a group formed to develop a Managed Pollinator Protection Plan for Michigan was held in February. The group included representatives of key stakeholders—producers, beekeepers, government agencies, public policy groups, and university researchers and extension educators.

A Managed Pollinator Protection Plan or “MP3” is a set of recommendations

and practices for the protection of managed pollinators that allows both crop production and bee keeping to thrive. The plan is intended to facilitate a collaborative approach to implementing risk mitigation practices for beekeepers, growers, and applicators while allowing for the appropriate and necessary use of crop protection tools. The scope of the MP3 is currently limited to “managed

pollinators,” which include any species of pollinators managed by humans, be it for pollination services; the production of honey, beeswax, and other products; or for some other purpose. The intent is to develop a final plan that meets local needs, addresses the national goals for MP3 plans, and has workable components. A separate plan for habitat renewal for pollinators will also be developed.

# VEGETABLE LABOR SURVEY

## Results and Implications

### DESCRIPTION OF THE SURVEY

In recent years, vegetable growers have experienced crop and sales losses as a result of seasonal labor shortages. Growers have also passed on opportunities to expand production because of concerns about labor availability. To get a current snapshot of labor needs and shortages, the Michigan Vegetable Council commissioned a survey of vegetable growers by the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) for the 2014 crop year. Growers of 15 or more acres of vegetable crops were surveyed. A total of 580 vegetable operations completed the survey. In separate surveys, fruit and greenhouse/nursery growers also provided information on their labor needs and availability.

### CURRENT SITUATION

Michigan is ideally suited by climate and soils for growing a broad diversity of vegetables. By its nature, much of this production is labor-intensive. Over the years, the supply of seasonal labor to harvest and pack crops has cyclically fluctuated between adequate and tight. Today's critical shortage is unprecedented and demands action if growers are to stay competitive in growing these crops.

A number of factors have caused today's needs for labor to exceed the supply. Consumer demand for "locally grown" produce, along with freight cost advantages over western states, has strengthened the market for Michigan-grown fruit and vegetables. At the same time, some of the traditional migrant labor population has been "aging out," while some former farm workers have moved on to jobs outside of agriculture. The federal H-2A guest worker program, which was initiated in 1986 to bring in foreign nationals on temporary work visas, is cumbersome, slow-moving and fraught with administrative perils to growers. Until the last few years, H-2A was used by only a few growers in Michigan.

Michigan's Work Force Development Agency has responded to the agricultural labor shortage by attempting to source farm labor from the U.S. domestic population. However, growers have not had much success with the well-intended attempts of this agency to find workers willing to perform traditional agricultural labor.

The labor-intensive sector of the Michigan vegetable industry is at a crossroads and needs a clear

understanding of its current position. A critical mass of harvested production is required to sustain its infrastructure. Costly packing facilities need minimum volumes maintain profitability. Reduced supplies and unfilled orders would harm the industry's reputation and could cause Michigan to again become a last-resort or fill-in region for buyers. The produce trucking sector thrives on concentrated high-volume shipping points and could recast Michigan as an out-of-the-way supplier of fresh produce.

### RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

The survey results for vegetables reported a peak of 88 vegetable farms in September 2014 that needed additional workers. As expected, labor shortages caused lost sales. Vegetable growers reported losing sales of \$6.6 million because of worker shortages. Although not measured in the survey, there are numerous accounts of sales lost from crops that were never planted because of concerns about labor availability. The labor shortages occurred in spite of paying higher wages. The average hourly wage paid by the vegetable farms surveyed increased from \$9.90 in 2013 to \$10.40 in 2014.

The vegetable farms surveyed hired 4,000 migrant workers, which accounted for 63% of all seasonal workers. Of this total, 2,550 (64%) had been previously employed by the farm and 2,800 (70%) were provided housing.

Of the vegetable farms surveyed, 17% used want ads and other means to recruit locally and 16% used agricultural employment specialists from state agencies (e.g., Michigan Works!). Only 3% of the farms surveyed used H-2A as a source of workers in 2014.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

1. The supply of workers from the traditional migrant labor force will continue to decline in response to the "aging out" of these workers, along with a likely increase of enforcement efforts directed at workers not legally documented.
2. In spite of the cost and difficulties associated with the H-2A guest worker program, the use of this program can be expected to increase. Great Lakes Ag Labor Services, LLC was started as a pilot project by Michigan Farm Bureau in 2014, bringing in 90 workers for four fruit farms in Michigan using the H-2A program. Great Lakes provides compliance,

application and worker services for growers using the H-2A program. In 2015, Great Lakes expanded to 10 fruit and vegetable farms and 405 workers. In 2016, the program is again being expanded to about 20 farms and 900 workers. In addition, other growers are working with independent contractors to bring in H-2A workers.

**3.** Partly because of increased use of H-2A workers, hourly labor costs will likely continue to increase. The minimum hourly wage for H-2A workers in 2015 was \$11.56.

**4.** Growers will continue to look for ways to increase labor efficiency, both through efforts to retain the best seasonal workers each year and to develop or improve mechanical picking aids.

**5.** Some growers will respond to opportunities to grow vegetable crops that can be mechanically harvested and others will downsize or get out of growing vegetables.

## **SUMMARY COMMENTS**

The most alarming and permanent change in labor availability is simply an “aging out” of a generation of agricultural workers. Each farm in Michigan has its own story, but the common thread is that there is a decline in the number of workers available for seasonal agricultural work. Many growers are still relying on historical relationships with a pool of worker families and facilitators that spans several generations of employees.

Improved efforts by growers to recruit and retain labor continue to be the most promising solution to the labor crisis. Growers need to recognize that the “aging out” of agricultural workers, changed family structures, and competition for employees are on-going trends. Solutions range from developing long-term relationships with labor contractors, to providing new services and benefits to farm workers, to using the H-2A program in some cases for seasonal labor needs.