

More than one H-2A provider serves Washington

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

YAKIMA, Wash. — Continuing shrinkage of the available labor force in every sector of agriculture is a big concern to growers, a top supplier of foreign farm-workers says.

The company masLabor of Lovington, Va., is the leading supplier of H-2A and H-2B-visa foreign guest-workers in the nation, providing 13,000 workers annually to 800 clients in 46 states and in nearly every ag sector.

Its program manager, Kerry Scott, spoke at the Washington Growers League annual meeting at the Yakima Convention Center on Jan. 26.

While WAFLA, formerly known as the Washington Farm Labor Association, provided 7,895 of the 11,844 H-2A workers used in Washington in 2015, masLabor provided about 500. Zirkle Fruit Co., Selah, hired 2,889, according to U.S. Department of Labor records.

MasLabor hires the Washington Growers League to do some of its legwork in Washington and began offering services in the state several years ago, about the same time WAFLA's H-2A services began expanding.

WAFLA recruits, transports and provides H-2A workers from Mexico for employers. It offers individual, shared and sequential services.

MasLabor generally costs more but offers a greater degree of customization with individual and shared contracts, Scott said. Growers have a greater chance of getting the same workers back each year that they have trained, he said.

MasLabor's shared or joint-employer contracts offer greater shared grower control and shared liability so it takes growers who work well together and trust each other, he said.

Sequential services, whereby H-2A workers harvest different kinds of crops for different growers in sequence, can get tricky if weather or other factors cause last-minute changes in need, Scott said.

Growers have switched in both directions between masLabor and WAFLA and some are well suited to WAFLA, he said.

Florida citrus growers have found they can get the same amount of work done with 25 percent fewer H-2A workers than domestic workers because H-2A workers work harder, Scott said.

Tree fruit packers can use H-2A workers if packing their own fruit but have to hire H-2B workers if packing fruit for other growers. The H-2B program is more difficult to navigate, he said.

Mike Gempler, executive director of Washington Growers League, talked about shakedowns for money and exploitation that can happen with contractors in Mexico hired to recruit workers. He said it's important to have ethical companies doing that work. U.S. law does not apply in Mexico, but U.S. labor advocates want the U.S. government to exercise jurisdiction over H-2A recruitment there, which would slow down the process and increase costs, he said.

Brendan Monahan, a Yakima labor attorney, talked about H-2A risks including foreign and domestic recruiting, wages, medical liabilities and more invasive federal and state audits.



Kerry Scott



Brendan Monahan

Farm equipment sales mixed, Colusa vendors say

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

COLUSA, Calif. — Farm equipment sales in California are a mixed bag, say vendors at the 51st annual Colusa Farm Show.

Lately, much of the prospects for equipment companies have depended on the commodities they service. For companies that cater to the tree nut industry, such as Chico, Calif., based Wizard Manufacturing, business has remained fairly brisk.

"We've been holding our own," company salesman Dave Mulqueeny said as he greeted farm show attendees on Feb. 2. "If the drought continues for another year, it might (affect the business). So far it hasn't affected our business."

But for businesses whose customers grow crops that have been affected by drought, business has slowed as farmers' budgets tighten.

"Let's hope El Nino picks up the ag economy," said Howard J. Ditzkof, president of J and S Equipment in Concord, Calif. "The ag economy has been awful. The whole ag economy has crumbled with the drought. But with the rain, I'm optimistic about this year."

Salespeople from Wizard



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

A cutting demonstration is given at the 51st annual Colusa Farm Show on Feb. 2 at the fairgrounds in Colusa, Calif. Hundreds of vendors displayed their goods and services at the three-day show.

and J and S were among hundreds of vendors of agricultural goods large and small at the self-proclaimed "granddaddy of farm shows" Feb. 2-4 at the fairgrounds in Colusa.

The show was to include seminars on insurance, social media, safety and other topics as well as the annual Ag Leadership Breakfast sponsored by California State University-Chico's College of Agriculture and its supporters, set for earlier this week.

The farm show comes as prices paid to farmers nationwide haven't kept pace with expenses in the last year after a period in which farm commodity prices increased by 33 percent from 2009 to 2014.

Moreover, in the mid Sacramento Valley, many rice growers have had to reduce acreage in the past couple of years because there hasn't been enough water available.

John O'Brien, chief oper-

ating officer of the Merced, Calif.-based N and S Tractor Co., said its stores have remained fairly busy despite the drought.

"We've been pretty fortunate," O'Brien said. "They're farming less ground but they still need equipment. Hopefully this rain keeps going and we can get the lakes full."

For some retailers, business has been driven by regulation. New state air quality standards for diesel-powered



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

Dave Mulqueeny, a salesman for Wizard Manufacturing in Chico, stands near a machine used for externally drying walnuts before they're sent to the dehydrator. The display was at the Colusa Farm Show on Feb. 2 at the fairgrounds in Colusa, Calif.

irrigation power units have sent some growers to EnviroPro Energy Co. in Williams, Calif., whose natural gas and propane-powered equipment are exempt.

"The irrigation market is very robust right now because of" the new stricter emissions regulations, EnviroPro president and general manager Joe Silva said during the farm show.

"It's an alternative," he said of his company's equipment. "We actually have competitors here this year."

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