

## GROWING LABOR NEEDS WITH INCREASED FARM WORK

It is hard to believe we are already back to daylight savings time. Most of us are happy to feel temperatures rising, see snow melting and to anticipate working in our fields, gardens and yards. Today's mud becomes tomorrow's dust at an alarming rate.

An annual dilemma we face on Cache Valley farms is how to get all the spring work done in a timely manner. Crops that are planted early typically produce higher yields and greater net profits. Persistent storms can often delay cropping practices by days, or even weeks. This quandary is even more complicated for farmers who manage dairy herds, because field work is added to the daily duties of barn work.

Dairy farmers who produce their own crops know that labor and management duties increase dramatically during planting and harvest times. In many cases, dairy managers give priority to field work, because they know how critical timing is to planting and harvest. Added stress comes when workers who usually work in the barn are pressed into service in the fields. Workers are forced to rush through their work at the barn in order to get into the fields, or a skeleton crew attempts to do the work that normally requires the efforts of multiple people. The usual result is a reduction in the quality and quantity of care given to the dairy herd.

The costs of reduced care and management at the barn are not always observed, but can quickly become very costly. A Penn State Dairy Publication asks a few questions and offers some logical options that are listed below.

How much less dry matter will cows eat on a given day because the feeder didn't have time to clean out the feedbunks? How much milk production will be lost because of this shortcut? If the herdsman wasn't drilling grain, would he have noticed that cow with ketosis before she developed a displaced abomasum? If we don't watch for heats as closely in May and June, can we catch up on the breeding later in the summer?

It should be clear that stretching the regular dairy workforce to cover the demands of field work may not be good plan. The costs associated with neglecting some aspects of cow care and management may easily outweigh the costs of hiring additional labor.

One option is to turn to the services of custom equipment operators. By hiring custom operators to do the field work, the dairy workforce can continue their regular work routines. This option also saves the cost of investing in new field equipment. A downside of this option is that custom operators have multiple customers, and your field work may not be scheduled as timely as desired.

Option two is to hire additional labor to operate the field equipment. Ideally, skilled labor can operate well maintained machinery with proficiency and complete field work in a timely manner. A disadvantage of this option is that field work is often performed on a last-minute basis when the weather is right. It is difficult to schedule people to work long hours on short notice, especially if they are also working at other jobs. Another disadvantage is that there is little opportunity to train people in advance on how to operate the equipment.

A third option is to bring seasonal help in for certain parts of the dairy operation. Many dairy jobs such as milking, feeding, bedding and cleanup, must be performed year-round. Dairy farmers can hire and train additional labor to cover these jobs during the busiest parts of the crop season, and they can schedule these types of jobs in advance. This frees the regular workforce, often family members or seasoned employees with equipment operating experience, to do field work on a short-notice basis. It also allows them to stay in the fields for extended periods without the interruption of work on the dairy.

There are costs associated with any chosen option. Employees obviously expect a regular paycheck. Choosing not to employ additional labor will generally lead to hidden costs in the form of lost productivity. As such, any decision will cost money. Good managers will examine all options and choose the one which appears to turn the greatest net profit.

An adequate supply of well trained labor is the only way to ensure quality care in the fields and at the barn. Unfortunately, finding willing workers is not an easy thing, and it seems to be getting more difficult each year.