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Labor Shortage Poses Safety Challenges for Growing Agritourism Industry

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ABSTRACT

Trends: Agritourism is increasingly popular, generating the need for additional employees. Given the labor shortages in the U.S., this motivates producers on agritourism operators to develop strategies to address the labor shortages, some of which could impact worker safety. **Research and current initiatives:** Contributing factors to labor shortages in agriculture include the aging workforce, declining rural populations, the stressful nature of agricultural work, long hours and less labor intensive options. Foreign labor has been impacted by immigration policy changes, H2A program inefficiencies and the recent pandemic. Staffing agritourism operations is further complicated by the need for seasonal employees and staff with varying skill sets, such as hospitality, food service, and retail; industries with critical labor shortages. Some strategies agritourism operators employ to address staff shortages (e.g. employees work longer hours, hiring younger staff) may impact safety. Collaborations between producers and safety professionals could help develop strategies to address labor shortages while ensuring worker safety. **Gaps in knowledge, regulation and practice:** More information is needed on employees on agritourism operations including the number of employees, hours worked, tasks performed, safety training provided, impact of customers in worksites, injuries incurred, current strategies employed to address the labor shortages, and motivators for staff to participate in safety training. **Recommendations for the future:** Research is needed to address the gaps in knowledge previously mentioned, and the information gathered used to develop recommendations, safety strategies and resources to help agritourism operators employ effective recruitment and retention strategies that also help establish a safe working environment.

KEYWORDS

USA; agriculture; agritourism; worker; safety

Trends

As the popularity of agritourism activities in the U.S. continues to trend upward, it generates an increased need for more employees, creating challenges for managers and owners of agritourism operations given the labor shortages in the U.S. These challenges spark the need for increased collaboration between agritourism producers and safety and health professionals to develop strategies producers can use to address the labor shortages while ensuring worker safety.

From 2002 to 2017, there was a 300% increase in revenue (adjusted by inflation) generated by U.S. farms offering agritourism as producers looked for ways to diversify income and increase farm revenues.¹ Projections indicate significant continued growth in agritourism activities and revenues through 2027.²

The increase in agritourism activities generates the need for additional employees during a time when labor is becoming increasingly scarce. Awareness of labor shortages in general is made plain to anyone just by turning on the radio – help wanted ads featuring sign on bonuses and competitive wages flood the programming. Similar ads are seen on television, social media, online, and in print ads. Particular attention to the labor shortage in the agritourism industry was emphasized in sessions and discussions at the 2021 Great Lakes Expo and Convention in Grand Rapids MI and the 2022 International NAFDMA Agritourism Conference and Expo.

As agritourism activities continue to gain in popularity, it increases the need for additional employees which are difficult to find with the current labor shortage, motivating agritourism owners to look for strategies to address this gap.

Some of these potential strategies, such as lengthening employee shifts and hiring younger workers, could negatively impact worker safety.^{3–5} In addition, the diversity of agritourism activities (crop mazes, u-pick, farm stay, etc.) and the addition of visitors in the worksite may add to the complexity of safety risks and training needs. Collaboration with safety professionals could help agritourism producers enhance safety strategies to address any potential negative impacts. Many safety professionals, such as those working in Extension at land grant institutions and others at the NIOSH funded Agricultural and Health Centers, already have expertise in agricultural safety and either have or can access information and resources on agritourism safety as well.

Research analysis, current initiatives

Labor shortages in agriculture are not new, but seem to be worsening. The Ag Barometer from Purdue University found nearly 2/3 (66%) of respondents said they either have “some” or “a lot of difficulty” hiring labor in July 2021, compared to 30% the year previously.⁶

The reasons for the labor shortages are varied and complex. Within agriculture, farm operators are aging and rural populations declining⁷ with few young producers coming in to fill the gap due to high land and equipment prices and numerous work stressors such as volatile commodity prices, unpredictable weather, and long hours. The retirement of many of the baby boom generation has spawned labor shortages across many industries, providing many employees with less labor-intensive options.⁸

Data also indicates farm labor moved from domestic to foreign workers over the last several decades, including a 70% decline of family farm labor.⁹ Complicating the issue even further, the traditional sources of foreign farm labor such as migrant and immigrant labor has been impacted by immigration policy changes and H-2A program inefficiencies, which were exacerbated during the recent pandemic.⁸ Hiring workers through the H-2A program was a strategy mentioned at both the Great Lakes Expo¹⁰ and the NAFDMA conference,¹¹ but producers noted that use of the program can be cumbersome and expensive and

may not work for all types of agricultural operations.¹² Producers have also commented that the program can be complex and often moves too slow for workers to arrive on time to fulfill their labor needs,^{13–15} incentivizing some producers to hire other types of employees, such as teens.

The difficulty acquiring staff in the agritourism sector is complicated even further by the need for seasonal or short-term employees, often in high numbers. Agritourism staff may also need a broader or different skill set from those found on the more typical types of agricultural operations. In addition to agricultural tasks, agritourism also needs employees with skills in hospitality, food service, retail, tourism and human resources. These industries have also been affected by labor shortages, with hospitality, food and retail industries experiencing high rates of worker loss.¹⁶

As the need for employees in the agritourism industry increases while the labor shortage continues to worsen, agritourism operators are discussing and using various strategies to find staff. Hiring bonuses, higher wages and flexible scheduling are used to try to be competitive with other job opportunities.¹⁷ Other strategies that producers are discussing and/or using could ultimately impact worker safety, which is where collaborating with safety organizations to modify the strategies would be important. For instance, producers mentioned hiring youth (some mentioning employees as young as twelve),^{10,11,17} which increases the likelihood of worker injury; more youth are fatally injured working in agriculture than all other industries combined.³ If hiring younger workers, it is critical to assess the youth’s ability to safely perform the work, as studies show that matching a youth’s abilities to a task can reduce injuries by half or more.^{18,19} Modifying the youth hiring strategy to include the use of work guidelines to assess a youth’s abilities is one example of how this type of collaboration would work.

Some agritourism operators mentioned extending the length of work shifts and encouraging family members and employees to work overtime.⁸ Because fatigue can increase injuries in young workers,^{4,5} this is another instance where a collaborative modification would be helpful. Another example is the hiring of H-2A workers

or other foreign-born workers.¹⁰ Collaboration could help generate solutions to address language and cultural barriers and other associated issues which could negatively impact worker safety.²⁰ Collaboration could also provide better methods for gathering more information on the strategies producers are employing and potential impacts of these strategies on worker safety.

Safety organizations can also help agritourism operators increase safety trainings offered on their operations, as training helps prevent injuries.²¹ It was noted in a 2017 survey of agritourism operators that training specific to safety was not commonly offered, with food safety being the only safety topic that more than half of the operations provided.²² Safety organizations could offer training materials, technical assistance, and in some instances even assistance with training, while agritourism associations could provide access to agritourism producers and workers.

Gaps in knowledge, regulation and practice

A collaboration between safety professionals and agritourism associations could greatly enhance the development of strategies to address labor shortages while enhancing worker safety. However, to successfully carry out these efforts, more information is needed on:

- the number, type and characteristics of staff being hired
- the hours employees are working (seasonal, part time, full time, overtime, etc.)
- the types of jobs/tasks performed (farm work, retail, hospitality, food service, etc.),
- the type and amount of safety training being conducted
- the impact of customers in the worksite
- the strategies agritourism producers are using to address the labor shortage
- which strategies are being used most commonly
- how effective these strategies are in recruiting and retaining workers
- what would incentivize agritourism operators and their staff to participate in safety training and adopt safety best practices.

In addition to the items listed, gathering data and/or stories on injuries occurring on these farms could also help inform future work and highlight the need for collaboration between producers and safety professionals.

Recommendations for the future

As agritourism activities continue to increase in the U.S. over the next several years and labor shortages worsen, research is needed to address the gaps in knowledge previously mentioned. Collaborations between safety professionals and agritourism associations, such as NAFDMA, state associations, farm market associations, etc. could greatly enhance the quality and quantity of information gathered through surveys, focus groups and/or interviews to address these gaps. This information could then be used to develop recommendations, safety strategies and resources to help agritourism operators employ effective recruitment and retention strategies that also help establish a safe working environment. These recommendations, strategies and resources could then be tested through the same collaborations to identify motivators and barriers to implementation and develop effective dissemination and implementation strategies.

Effective strategies with a specific focus on worker safety training on agritourism operations will help safeguard workers on agritourism operations, while assisting farm owners with establishing a safe work culture, enhancing worker recruitment and continuing to grow their agritourism operations.

Disclosure statement

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