

ELM LAKE CRANBERRY

Farm Hiring Process Improvement

Wisconsin labor market analysis, recruiting channels, pay benchmarks,
and a 90-day action plan for Elm Lake Cranberry

Prepared for Elm Lake Cranberry

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1. Executive Summary

Elm Lake Cranberry faces a challenge shared by agricultural operations across Wisconsin: finding and retaining qualified farm workers in an increasingly competitive labor market. With approximately six employees managing 150 acres of cranberry production, every hire matters — a single bad fit or unexpected departure can significantly disrupt operations.

This report provides a comprehensive, actionable hiring improvement plan tailored to Elm Lake Cranberry's specific situation. It covers the Wisconsin agricultural labor market landscape, pay benchmarks grounded in current USDA and state data, a detailed catalog of recruiting channels with specific contacts, an honest assessment of the H-2A visa program's viability for a small operation, AI-assisted hiring tools, ready-to-post job descriptions, a retention strategy built around completion bonuses and career progression, and a 90-day action plan to put it all into motion.

Key findings: - The Lake Region (WI/MI/MN) average farm wage reached **\$20.92/hr** in April 2025, up \$1.75 from the prior year. Elm Lake must pay at or above this level for skilled positions to remain competitive. - **Mid-State Technical College (MSTC)** in Wisconsin Rapids is the single highest-value recruiting channel — their Agriculture programs (Farm Operation, Agribusiness Science & Technology, Ag Diesel Engines) produce graduates with exactly the skills ELC needs. - **H-2A is not cost-effective** for an operation of this size. The math works against you below ~10 workers. Alternatives exist (labor-sharing cooperatives, H-2B for non-ag seasonal tasks). - A structured **retention bonus program** (\$1.50–\$2.00/hr banked and paid at season completion) combined with a clear **skills progression ladder** can dramatically reduce turnover. - Three ready-to-post job descriptions are included — John can literally post these tomorrow.

2. Wisconsin Agricultural Labor Market Analysis

2.1 Current Labor Shortage Data

Wisconsin's agricultural labor market is historically tight. Key data points:

- **52,000 workers** were hired directly by farms in the Lake Region (MI, MN, WI) during the April 2025 reference week (USDA NASS). This is down from 62,000 in July 2024 and 65,000 in October 2024, reflecting seasonal fluctuation but also a broader contraction.
- **Wisconsin farm employment** is estimated at roughly 24,000 employees statewide (UW-Extension lower-bound estimate based on UI-covered workers; actual number including small farms is higher).
- The **unemployment rate in Wood County** has remained below 4% consistently, meaning there is effectively no surplus labor pool waiting to be hired.
- The USDA Economic Research Service reports that wages for nonsupervisory farm occupations ranged from **\$17.23/hr** (general farmworkers) to **\$19.07/hr** (equipment operators) nationally in 2024, with year-over-year increases exceeding 3% in five of six occupation categories.

2.2 Competing Industries Pulling Workers

Farm workers in central Wisconsin are being recruited away by industries that offer:

INDUSTRY	TYPICAL WAGE	KEY APPEAL
Amazon / Warehousing	\$18-\$22/hr	Climate-controlled, consistent hours, benefits
Construction	\$20-\$30/hr	Higher hourly, seasonal overlap with farming
Manufacturing (paper, plastics)	\$18-\$25/hr	Year-round stability, benefits packages
Kwik Trip / Retail	\$15-\$18/hr + benefits	Low physical demand, advancement paths
Dairy Operations	\$16-\$20/hr + housing	Year-round work, often includes housing

The core problem: Entry-level farm work competes directly with Amazon warehouses (Plover, ~25 miles away), Verso/Domtar paper operations, and construction trades — all of which offer comparable or better pay with more predictable schedules and climate-controlled environments.

2.3 Seasonal vs. Year-Round Labor Dynamics for Cranberry

Cranberry farming has a distinct labor cycle:

- **Year-round (core crew, 3–4 employees):** Bog maintenance, frost protection, irrigation management, equipment maintenance, dike and ditch work. These are the essential positions requiring the most skill and institutional knowledge.
- **Spring (April–June):** Frost season ramps up labor needs. Overnight frost watches, pump operation, weed management begin.
- **Peak season (September–November):** Harvest is the most labor-intensive period. Requires operators for harvesters, berry pumps, trucks, and intake facilities. Typically need 2–4 additional seasonal workers.
- **Winter (December–March):** Reduced crew. Ice sanding, equipment repair, pruning, flood management. Some operations run with as few as 1–2 employees.

Implication for ELC: You need a dual-track hiring strategy — (1) recruit and retain 4–5 year-round skilled workers, and (2) develop a reliable pipeline for 2–4 seasonal harvest workers.

2.4 Demographic Trends

- Wisconsin's rural population continues to age. The median age in Wood County is approximately 42 years, above the state average.
 - Younger workers (18–35) are migrating to Madison, Milwaukee, and Twin Cities metro areas.
 - Hispanic/Latino workers make up an increasing share of Wisconsin's agricultural workforce (estimated 40–50% of seasonal hired farm labor statewide), though this proportion is lower in central Wisconsin compared to the southeastern part of the state.
 - The number of farms in Wood County has declined steadily — fewer farms means fewer people growing up with agricultural skills and affinity.
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3. Pay Benchmarks

3.1 Current Market Rates (Central Wisconsin, 2025)

Based on USDA Farm Labor Survey data, Wisconsin Ag Connection reporting, Indeed salary data, and industry sources:

POSITION	LOW	COMPETITIVE	PREMIUM
Entry-Level Farm Worker	\$15.50/hr	\$17.00–\$18.00/hr	\$19.00+/hr
Equipment Operator (tractor, harvester)	\$18.00/hr	\$20.00–\$22.00/hr	\$24.00+/hr
Skilled/Experienced (irrigation, spray, CDL)	\$20.00/hr	\$22.00–\$25.00/hr	\$27.00+/hr
Farm Manager (salaried)	\$55,000/yr	\$65,000–\$75,000/yr	\$80,000+/yr
Seasonal Harvest Worker	\$15.50/hr	\$17.00–\$19.00/hr	\$20.00+/hr (w/ bonus)

Key benchmarks: - **USDA Lake Region average:** \$20.92/hr (April 2025), \$18.40/hr (July 2024), \$19.46/hr (October 2024) - **Indeed Wisconsin farm worker average:** \$15.64/hr (self-reported, likely skewed low by entry-level postings) - **National nonsupervisory farm equipment operators:** \$19.07/hr (USDA ERS, 2024) - **H-2A AEWRR for Wisconsin (2025):** \$18.15/hr — this is effectively the government-determined floor for what farm labor is “worth” in this market

3.2 Recommended ELC Pay Structure

POSITION	RECOMMENDED RANGE	RATIONALE
Farm Worker / Operations Associate	\$17.50–\$20.00/hr	Must beat Kwik Trip/Amazon floor. Competitive with dairy.
Equipment Operator	\$20.00–\$24.00/hr	Specialized skill. Directly competes with construction.
Seasonal Harvest Worker	\$17.00–\$19.00/hr + harvest bonus	Bonus structure (see Retention section) is the differentiator.

3.3 Benefits That Matter

For a small operation that can't match corporate benefit packages, focus on what farm workers actually value:

1. **Housing assistance** — Even a stipend (\$200–\$400/mo) or helping connect workers with affordable local housing is huge. If ELC has or could add any on-farm housing, this becomes the #1 recruiting advantage.
2. **End-of-season bonus** — See Section 8. This is the single most effective retention tool.
3. **Flexible scheduling** — “Work hard when it’s time to work, go home when we’re done” beats a rigid clock.
4. **Equipment/gear provided** — Boots, gloves, rain gear, sun protection. Small cost, big signal that you invest in your people.
5. **Health insurance contribution** — Even \$200–\$300/mo toward an ACA plan stands out. Most small farms offer nothing.
6. **Fuel / transportation help** — Gas prices hit rural workers hard. A fuel card or mileage supplement is valued highly.
7. **Paid time for training/certifications** — CDL prep, pesticide applicator license, etc. Invest in them and they stay.

3.4 Competitor Landscape

- **Other cranberry operations (Wetherby, Glacial Lake, Habelman Brothers)**: Comparable pay ranges; larger operations may offer better benefits packages but less autonomy and variety.
- **Dairy farms (Marathon/Portage County)**: \$16–\$20/hr, often include housing. Year-round work is appealing to many.
- **Potato operations (Plover/Bancroft area)**: Seasonal peaks overlap with cranberry harvest. Pay \$16–\$20/hr for seasonal, \$18–\$22 for CDL/equipment operators.
- **Vegetable/nursery operations**: Similar seasonal dynamics, generally lower pay (\$14–\$17/hr).

4. Recruiting Channels

4.1 Mid-State Technical College (MSTC) — TOP PRIORITY

This is ELC's single most valuable recruiting partner. MSTC's Wisconsin Rapids campus is literally in your backyard and produces graduates with directly relevant training.

Relevant Programs: - **Farm Operation** (Technical Diploma) — Day-to-day farm management, equipment, soil science, precision ag. Estimated cost: \$4,821/yr. Faculty lead: **Teri Raatz, BS, MS** (Agricultural Education, UW–River Falls; Agriculture/Ag Sustainability, Murray State University) - **Agribusiness Science & Technology** (Associate Degree) — Business management, agronomy, marketing - **Agronomy Technician** (Technical Diploma) — Crop management, soil science, precision agriculture - **Ag Diesel Engines and Equipment** (Certificate) — Equipment maintenance and repair - **Agronomy Equipment Basics** (Certificate) — Foundational equipment operation

Wisconsin Rapids Campus Address:

500 32nd Street North, Wisconsin Rapids, WI 54494

Main Phone: (715) 422-5300

Action Items: 1. Contact MSTC Career Services and the Ag Department (ask for Teri Raatz or the Ag Program Director) 2. Propose a formal **Cranberry Production Internship** (see draft email below) 3. Offer to host an MSTC class visit / farm tour 4. Attend MSTC's annual **Agribusiness Farm Tour** as a featured operation 5. Post positions on MSTC's career board (free for employer partners)

Draft Outreach Email to MSTC:

Subject: Cranberry Farm Internship Partnership — Elm Lake Cranberry

Dear Agriculture Program Team,

I'm John Moss, owner of Elm Lake Cranberry, a 150-acre cranberry operation here in Wisconsin Rapids. We're exploring a partnership with Mid-State's agriculture programs to create internship and employment opportunities for your students.

Cranberry farming is a unique niche within Wisconsin agriculture that combines traditional land management with modern technology — GPS-guided equipment, automated irrigation and frost protection systems, water resource management, and precision agriculture techniques. We believe this would be an excellent hands-on learning environment for students in your Farm Operation, Agribusiness, or Agronomy programs.

What we're proposing: - **Paid internship positions** (spring through fall, flexible scheduling around class times) - **Farm tour days** open to your classes (we'd love to host a field trip) - **Part-time or full-time employment** for graduates interested in cranberry production

Our Farm Manager, Gil Lancour, and I would welcome the chance to meet with you and discuss how we can support your students while building our team. Would you have time for a brief call or campus visit in the next few weeks?

Best regards, John Moss Elm Lake Cranberry Wisconsin Rapids, WI [phone] | [email]

4.2 AgHires.com

The premier niche job board for agriculture. Serious ag candidates use AgHires — these aren't random Indeed applicants.

- **Pricing:** Starts at **\$900/month** for job posting packages (unlimited postings on your company career page). One-off postings are also available. They offer add-on packages for additional exposure through social media campaigns and partner network distribution (3,000+ digital media partners).
- **Services:** Job advertising, candidate lead generation, and full recruiting services (retained search for higher-level positions)
- **How to post:** Visit aghires.com/main/clients/products or contact their team directly
- **Recommendation:** For ELC's budget, start with a **single job posting** rather than a monthly subscription. If hiring for multiple positions simultaneously, the monthly package becomes cost-effective.
- **Best for:** Equipment operator and year-round positions (seasonal harvest positions are better sourced locally)

4.3 Wisconsin Job Center — Wood County

Address: 320 West Grand Avenue, Suite 102, Wisconsin Rapids, WI 54495

Phone: (715) 422-5000

Online posting portal: jobcenterofwisconsin.com

Regional Workforce Board: Advance Wisconsin Employment (formerly North Central Wisconsin WDB)

WDB Office: 3118 Post Road, Suite A, Stevens Point, WI 54481

WDB Phone: (715) 422-4716

WDB Director: Jane Spencer (jspencer@ncwwdb.org)

⚠ Important Note: The Wisconsin Rapids Job Center's Advance Wisconsin Employment services were slated to close at the end of 2025. However, the **Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development continues to provide employment services and vocational rehabilitation services** at the 320 W. Grand Ave location. Verify current status before visiting.

How to use: 1. Create an employer account at jobcenterofwisconsin.com 2. Post positions — free for Wisconsin employers 3. Flag postings for “Veterans Priority” to attract veteran candidates 4. Contact the Workforce Board about On-the-Job Training (OJT) subsidies — they may reimburse up to 50% of a new hire’s wages during a training period

4.4 FFA Chapters (District #19 — Wisconsin Rapids Area)

The following FFA chapters are in **District #19**, the district that includes Wisconsin Rapids. These chapters are the closest pipeline of young people with agricultural interest and training:

- 1. Wisconsin Rapids—Lincoln FFA** — Lincoln High School, Wisconsin Rapids (hometown chapter)
- 2. Pittsville FFA** — Pittsville High School (~15 miles west)
- 3. Auburndale FFA** — Auburndale High School (~12 miles northwest)
- 4. Marshfield FFA** — Marshfield High School (~25 miles northwest)
- 5. Amherst FFA** — Amherst High School (~30 miles east)
- 6. Stevens Point FFA** — Stevens Point Area Senior High (~25 miles east)
- 7. Spencer FFA** — Spencer High School (~35 miles northwest)
- 8. Stratford FFA** — Stratford High School (~35 miles northwest)
- 9. Rosholt FFA** — Rosholt High School (~40 miles northeast)

How to engage: - Contact the FFA advisor at Lincoln High School first (they’re local) - Offer to **speak to Ag classes** — bring a drone, show harvest videos, demonstrate tech used on the farm. Make it engaging, not a lecture. - Sponsor an FFA activity or award (Supervised Agricultural Experience / SAE awards) - Offer **summer employment** for FFA members (16+ years old, with appropriate work permits for minors) - Post openings through the Wisconsin FFA website: wisconsinaged.org - Consider hosting an **FFA farm visit** during non-peak season

4.5 Veterans Programs

Veterans are an outstanding talent pool for farm work: reliable, equipment-experienced, comfortable outdoors in all conditions, accustomed to physical work and chain of command.

Wisconsin DATCP Veteran Farmer Assistance & Outreach Program: - Website: datcp.wi.gov/Pages/AgDevelopment/VeteransInFarming.aspx - Operated through the **Wisconsin Farm Center** - Provides farm business planning resources, connects veterans with agricultural opportunities - Maintains the **Wisconsin Veteran Farmer List** at apps.dva.wisconsin.gov/VeteranFarmers — use this to network - “**Homegrown by Heroes**” program logo available for veteran-connected operations

Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA): - Website: dva.wi.gov/benefits/employment/veteran-farmers/ - Partners with DATCP on the Veteran Farmer program

Bonus: Military CDL Test Waiver Program (WI DOT): - Veterans who held military CDLs can obtain their Wisconsin CDL **without skills tests** (knowledge tests still required) - This means veteran hires can get CDL-qualified faster, which is valuable for harvest trucking

Local VFW/American Legion: - Post flyers at the **Wisconsin Rapids VFW Post 2534** (220 3rd Ave N) and **American Legion Post 9** - Ask to post in their newsletters or Facebook groups

4.6 4-H Clubs — Wood County

UW-Extension Wood County Office: - Website: wood.extension.wisc.edu - 4-H Program: wood.extension.wisc.edu/4-h/ - Agriculture Program: wood.extension.wisc.edu/agriculture/

How to connect: - Contact the Wood County 4-H Youth Development Educator through the Extension office - Offer to be a **4-H project mentor** (agriculture projects are core to 4-H) - Host a 4-H club visit during harvest season — this plants seeds (literally and figuratively) for future hires - 4-H members are typically 9–18 years old, so this is a **long-term pipeline** strategy, not immediate staffing

4.7 Social Media Recruiting Strategy

Facebook — Primary Channel for Rural WI: - Create or optimize an **Elm Lake Cranberry Facebook page** (if not already active) - Post “**Day in the Life**” short videos (60–90 seconds): Gil on a tractor, drone footage of harvest, sunrise on the bogs. Show the lifestyle, not just the labor. - Post job openings in these local Facebook groups: - “**Wisconsin Rapids Community**” / “**Wisconsin Rap-**

ids Buy Sell Trade” - “Wood County Jobs” or similar - “Wisconsin Farm Jobs” / “Wisconsin Agriculture Jobs” - “Cranberry Country” community groups - **Boost posts** targeting: 25-mile radius around Wisconsin Rapids, ages 18–55, interests in farming/agriculture/outdoors/hunting/fishing. Budget: \$50–\$100 per boosted post reaches thousands. - Ask employees (especially Gil) to share job posts — personal shares get 5–10x more engagement than page posts.

Instagram — Secondary/Visual Channel: - Post stunning aerial harvest photos, behind-the-scenes content - Use hashtags: #WisconsinFarming #CranberryHarvest #FarmLife #AgJobs #WisconsinAg #CranberryCountry - Stories showing daily work life attract younger workers (18–30 demographic)

Key principle: Sell the lifestyle — autonomy, being outdoors, working with your hands, seeing tangible results, operating cool equipment. Don’t just post “Help Wanted.”

4.8 Local Community Channels

- **Church bulletins:** Contact 5–6 of the largest churches in Wisconsin Rapids (First Lutheran, SS Peter & Paul Catholic, First Congregational, Immanuel Lutheran, Assembly of God). Most will post job openings in bulletins for free.
- **Laundromat / gas station bulletin boards:** Print attractive flyers (not just text — include a photo of the farm). Post at the Fleet Farm, Kwik Trip (ask permission), and local laundromats.
- **Daily Tribune (Wisconsin Rapids newspaper):** Consider a classified ad or small display ad in the print edition. Still widely read by the demographic you’re targeting.
- **Wisconsin Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce:** They maintain a job board and can connect you with workforce development resources. Website: wisconsinrapidschamber.com

5. H-2A Visa Program Analysis

5.1 Program Overview

The H-2A Temporary Agricultural Workers program allows U.S. employers to bring foreign nationals to the U.S. to fill temporary agricultural jobs when domestic workers are not available. It is

administered by three federal agencies: Department of Labor (DOL), USCIS, and the Department of State.

5.2 Requirements

1. **Temporary or seasonal need** — Must demonstrate the job is temporary in nature
2. **Domestic recruitment effort** — Must actively recruit U.S. workers first and show insufficient response
3. **No adverse effect on U.S. workers** — Cannot displace domestic workers
4. **Wage requirements** — Must pay the **Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR)**, prevailing wage, agreed-upon collective bargaining wage, or federal/state minimum wage — whichever is highest
5. **Wisconsin 2025 AEWR: \$18.15/hr** (Lake Region — MI, WI, MN; this actually decreased 1.9% from \$18.50 in 2024)
6. **Housing** — Must provide **free, government-inspected housing** for all H-2A workers (and any domestic workers who cannot reasonably return home daily)
7. **Transportation** — Must provide or reimburse inbound/outbound transportation from workers' home country and daily transportation to/from the worksite
8. **Meals** — Must provide three meals a day or furnish free and convenient cooking facilities
9. **Three-fourths guarantee** — Must guarantee employment for at least 75% of the contract period's work hours
10. **Tools and equipment** — Must provide all tools, supplies, and equipment at no cost

5.3 Timeline

STEP	TIMEFRAME BEFORE START DATE
Begin planning, contact agent/attorney	120+ days
Submit temporary labor certification to DOL	75 days
Place job orders with State Workforce Agency	75 days
Active domestic recruitment period	75–30 days
DOL issues certification (if approved)	~30 days
File I-129 petition with USCIS	30 days
Workers obtain visas at U.S. consulate	14–21 days
Workers arrive	Day 1

Total lead time: Minimum 90–120 days; realistically 5–6 months to be safe.

5.4 Cost Analysis for a 6-Person Operation

Assuming ELC needs **3 H-2A workers** for a **4-month harvest season** (August–November):

COST CATEGORY	PER WORKER	TOTAL (3 WORKERS)
Attorney/agent fees	\$1,500–\$2,500	\$4,500–\$7,500
USCIS I-129 filing fee	\$460	\$1,380
Visa integrity fee (new 2025)	\$250	\$750
International transportation (round trip)	\$400–\$650	\$1,200–\$1,950
Housing (rental/construction/maintenance)	\$9,000–\$13,000	\$27,000–\$39,000
Wages at AEWR (\$18.15 × 40hrs × 17 weeks)	\$12,342	\$37,026
Workers' comp insurance	\$800–\$1,200	\$2,400–\$3,600
Meals/cooking facilities	\$1,500–\$2,500	\$4,500–\$7,500
Domestic recruitment advertising	—	\$500–\$1,000
TOTAL ESTIMATED COST		\$79,256–\$99,706

Effective hourly cost per H-2A worker (all-in): approximately \$38–\$49/hr

5.5 Viability Assessment: Is H-2A Right for ELC?

Verdict: Almost certainly not, at current scale.

- **Housing is the dealbreaker.** If ELC doesn't have compliant worker housing, the cost of renting or building it for just 3 workers is prohibitive (\$27,000–\$39,000 for a single season).
- **The all-in cost per worker (\$38–\$49/hr)** is roughly **double** what you'd pay a domestic worker with a generous retention bonus.
- **Administrative burden** is significant — DOL audits, housing inspections, record-keeping requirements are designed for operations bringing in 20+ workers.
- **The 75-day lead time** makes it inflexible if your needs change.

5.6 Alternatives

H-2B (Non-Agricultural Temporary Workers): - Could work for ancillary tasks (warehouse, processing facility work) that don't qualify as "agricultural" - Subject to annual cap (66,000 visas nationally), much harder to get - Not recommended for ELC's core farm labor needs

Pooling with Other Growers: - Several Wisconsin cranberry growers could jointly sponsor H-2A workers through a **farm labor contractor** or **joint employer petition** - Workers rotate between operations based on harvest timing - Reduces per-farm cost significantly (shared housing, shared admin) - **Contact:** Wisconsin State Cranberry Growers Association (WSCGA) to explore interest — (715) 423-2070, wiscran.org

H-2A Labor Contractors: - Companies that hold H-2A certifications and "rent" crews to farms - You pay a higher hourly rate (\$25–\$35/hr) but avoid all housing, transportation, and administrative burden - Google "H-2A labor contractor Wisconsin" or ask WSCGA for referrals

5.7 H-2A Attorney/Agent Contact

If you decide to explore H-2A further:

- **Seso Labor** — sesolabor.com — Modern H-2A management platform, handles end-to-end compliance. Good for tech-forward operations.
- **Farmer Law PC / A&W Labor** — awlabor.com — Specialist H-2A attorneys, housing compliance guides

- **Labor Consultants International** — laborci.com — Full-service H-2A agents
 - **Harris Beach Murtha (law firm)** — harrisbeachmurtha.com — Has published updated 2025 H-2A guidance
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6. AI-Assisted Hiring Tools

6.1 AI Job Description Writers

TOOL	COST	BEST FOR
Claude / ChatGPT	Free–\$20/mo	Writing compelling, custom job descriptions. Prompt: "Write a job description for a cranberry farm worker that emphasizes outdoor lifestyle, autonomy, and technology use."
Textio	Enterprise pricing (\$\$\$)	Analyzing job post language for inclusivity and effectiveness. Overkill for ELC's scale.
LinkedIn AI Job Description	Included with LinkedIn job posts	Auto-generates descriptions from job title; good starting point to customize.
Workable AI	\$169/mo (Starter)	Full ATS with AI-powered job description generation, candidate matching

Recommendation for ELC: Use Claude or ChatGPT (free/low cost) to draft and refine job descriptions. No need for enterprise tools at this scale.

6.2 AI Screening/Matching Platforms

TOOL	COST	BEST FOR
Google Forms + manual review	Free	Simple pre-screening questionnaire linked from job posts. Filter out zero-effort applicants with 5–8 qualifying questions.
Workable	\$169/mo (Starter)	ATS with AI resume screening, candidate ranking, pipeline management
HireBee AI	Varies	AI-powered resume screening and candidate ranking
GoPerfect	Varies	AI recruiting software — sourcing through screening

Recommendation for ELC: Start with a **free Google Form** as a pre-screening filter. Include questions like: - Do you have a valid driver's license? (Y/N) - Can you lift 50+ lbs regularly? (Y/N) - Do you have experience operating farm equipment? (describe) - Are you available to work weekends during harvest season? (Y/N) - When can you start?

This simple step eliminates 40–60% of unqualified applicants before you spend time on them.

6.3 Automated Interview Scheduling

TOOL	COST	NOTES
Calendly	Free (basic) / \$10/mo	Share a link — candidates pick a time. Eliminates phone tag.
Google Calendar Appointment Slots	Free	Built into Google Workspace. Simple but effective.
When2Meet	Free	Good for coordinating group interviews or farm tour dates.

Recommendation: Set up a free **Calendly** link for scheduling interviews. Include it in your response to qualified applicants. Saves hours of back-and-forth.

7. Draft Job Postings

7.1 General Farm Worker / Operations Associate

 **Farm Operations Associate — Elm Lake Cranberry**
Wisconsin Rapids, WI | Full-Time, Year-Round | \$17.50–\$20.00/hr

About Us

Elm Lake Cranberry is a 150-acre cranberry operation in Wisconsin Rapids — the heart of Wisconsin's cranberry country. We combine time-tested farming practices with modern technology to produce premium cranberries. Our small, skilled team takes pride in working together, solving problems, and seeing the results of their work from planting through harvest.

What You'll Do

- Maintain and manage cranberry bogs year-round: flood management, frost protection, dike and ditch maintenance, weed control, pruning
- Operate and maintain farm equipment (tractors, mowers, pumps, sprayers)
- Monitor irrigation and water management systems
- Assist with harvest operations (September–November)
- Support equipment maintenance and basic repairs
- Work with GPS-guided equipment and precision agriculture tools

What We're Looking For

- Reliable and self-motivated — we value people who show up and take initiative
- Comfortable working outdoors in all weather conditions
- Ability to lift 50+ lbs and perform physically demanding work
- Valid driver's license (CDL a plus, not required)
- Experience with farm equipment or willingness to learn
- Mechanical aptitude is a big plus

What We Offer

- Competitive pay: \$17.50–\$20.00/hr based on experience
- Year-round employment with consistent hours
- End-of-season performance bonus
- Work gear provided (boots, gloves, rain gear)
- Hands-on training with experienced team and farm manager
- Autonomy — you're not a number here. You're part of a tight crew that gets things done.
- Real variety — every day and every season is different

No prior cranberry experience required. If you're hardworking, mechanically inclined, and want to be part of something real — not stuck in a warehouse — we want to hear from you.

To Apply: Call [phone], email [email], or stop by the farm. We'll show you around.

7.2 Equipment Operator

Equipment Operator — Elm Lake Cranberry

Wisconsin Rapids, WI | Full-Time, Year-Round | \$20.00–\$24.00/hr

About the Role

We're looking for an experienced equipment operator to join our team at Elm Lake Cranberry. This is a key position on a 150-acre cranberry operation — you'll operate and maintain a variety of equipment across all four seasons, from GPS-guided tractors and mowers to harvesters, pumps, and water management systems.

What You'll Do

- Operate tractors, mowers, harvesters, berry pumps, sprayers, and trucks - Perform routine equipment maintenance, inspections, and basic repairs - Manage bog flooding, frost protection, and irrigation systems - Haul cranberries during harvest season - Maintain dikes, ditches, and access roads - Work with precision agriculture technology (GPS, automated systems)

What You Bring

- 2+ years of experience operating farm, construction, or heavy equipment - Strong mechanical skills — you can troubleshoot and fix things in the field - Valid driver's license (CDL preferred or willingness to obtain) - Comfort with technology — we use modern equipment, not antiques - Reliability and pride in your work - Ability to work extended hours during peak season (harvest, frost events)

What We Offer

- \$20.00–\$24.00/hr based on experience and certifications - Year-round employment - End-of-season performance bonus - CDL training support (we'll help you get it) - Work gear provided - Small team, big responsibility — your skills directly impact our success

If you can run equipment and want a job where your skills matter every single day, this is it.

To Apply: Call [phone], email [email], or stop by.

7.3 Seasonal Harvest Worker

Seasonal Harvest Worker — Elm Lake Cranberry

Wisconsin Rapids, WI | Seasonal (Sept–Nov) | \$17.00–\$19.00/hr + Harvest Bonus

Cranberry harvest is one of the most unique experiences in Wisconsin agriculture. Come be part of it.

About the Job

Elm Lake Cranberry is hiring 2–3 seasonal workers for the 2026 cranberry harvest season (approximately September through November). You'll work alongside our experienced crew to bring in the crop — it's fast-paced, physical, and rewarding.

What You'll Do

- Assist with wet and dry harvest operations - Operate berry pumps, conveyors, and loading equipment - Drive trucks and tractors (if qualified) - Sort, clean, and load cranberries for delivery
- General labor: moving equipment, maintaining work areas, supporting the harvest crew

What We Need

- Dependable — harvest waits for no one, and neither do we - Physically fit and ready to work outdoors in fall conditions - Valid driver's license - Available for full-time hours (some weekends during peak harvest) - No cranberry experience necessary — we'll train you

What You Get

- \$17.00–\$19.00/hr - **Harvest completion bonus:** Stay through the end of harvest and earn a substantial end-of-season bonus (see details at interview) - Flexible scheduling around the harvest calendar - A front-row seat to one of Wisconsin's coolest agricultural traditions - Great experience for anyone interested in agriculture, outdoor work, or just something different

Perfect for: Students (gap between summer and winter semester), hunters looking for fall income, retirees wanting active outdoor work, anyone who wants to try something different.

To Apply: Call [phone], email [email], or just show up and ask for Gil.

8. Retention Strategy

8.1 End-of-Season Completion Bonus Structure

The single most effective retention tool for seasonal and year-round farm workers. Structure it so the payout is meaningful and the vesting is clear.

Proposed Structure:

WORKER TYPE	BONUS MECHANISM	EXAMPLE PAYOUT
Year-round employees	\$1.50/hr banked, paid annually on Dec 15	~\$3,120/yr (40hrs × 52wks × \$1.50)
Seasonal harvest (Sept–Nov)	\$2.00/hr banked, paid at season completion	~\$1,040 (40hrs × 13wks × \$2.00)
Equipment operators	\$1.50/hr banked + \$500 harvest completion bonus	~\$3,620/yr

Rules: - Bonus accrues every hour worked but is **only paid if the employee completes the season/year in good standing** - “Good standing” = didn’t quit, wasn’t fired for cause, maintained acceptable attendance - Paid as a lump sum — the psychological impact of a single check for \$1,000–\$3,000 is much greater than the equivalent spread across paychecks - Make the bonus structure **explicit at hiring** — it’s a recruiting tool as much as a retention tool

8.2 Skills Progression Ladder

Show workers there’s somewhere to go. Even on a small operation, progression matters for motivation and retention.

Proposed Ladder:

LEVEL	TITLE	SKILLS / MILESTONES	PAY RANGE
1	Farm Worker	General labor, basic tool use, safety certified	\$17.50–\$18.50/hr
2	Operations Associate	Equipment operation (tractors, mowers), irrigation basics, pesticide applicator license	\$18.50–\$20.00/hr
3	Equipment Operator	Full equipment certification (harvesters, pumps, sprayers), CDL, can run frost watch independently	\$20.00–\$23.00/hr
4	Senior Operator / Lead	Can train others, manage a crew, handle all equipment, trusted to run operations independently	\$23.00–\$26.00/hr
5	Assistant Farm Manager	Scheduling, inventory, vendor relationships, full operational independence	\$55,000–\$65,000 salary

Key: Have a brief conversation at hire about “where this job can go.” Show them the path. Review progress quarterly — even 5 minutes of “here’s what you’ve learned, here’s what’s next” shows investment.

8.3 Team Culture Recommendations

1. **Weekly team breakfast or lunch** (during season) — 30 minutes, \$50–\$75 in food. Builds camaraderie and gives people a reason to look forward to coming in.
2. **End-of-harvest celebration** — BBQ, bonfire, whatever fits the culture. Recognize contributions publicly. Hand out bonus checks here for maximum impact.
3. **“Gil’s Lead” structure** — Leverage Gil’s strength as farm manager. Empower him to mentor and develop workers, not just direct them. People quit bosses, not jobs — Gil being a great manager is ELC’s secret weapon.
4. **Safety culture** — Take it seriously and visibly. Workers who feel safe stay longer. Brief daily safety check-ins, proper PPE provided (not just available), no tolerance for unsafe shortcuts.
5. **Input and ownership** — Ask workers for ideas. “How could we do this better?” People who feel heard stay engaged. If someone suggests a process improvement and you implement it, give them credit publicly.
6. **Seasonal rituals** — Cranberry farming has natural milestones (first flood, frost season start, first harvest day, last truck). Mark them. These become the traditions that build loyalty.

8.4 Training and Cross-Training Plan

QUARTER	TRAINING FOCUS	METHOD
Q1 (Jan-Mar)	Equipment maintenance, winter prep, CDL study	Hands-on with Gil, online CDL prep
Q2 (Apr-Jun)	Irrigation/frost systems, pesticide applicator cert, safety refresher	Field training, WI DATCP certification
Q3 (Jul-Sep)	Harvest equipment operation, crew coordination, new hire training	Ride-along, supervised operation
Q4 (Oct-Dec)	Post-harvest, bog renovation, equipment winterization, annual review	On-the-job, review sessions

Cross-training goal: Every year-round employee should be able to perform at least 3 of the 5 core functions (equipment operation, irrigation/frost, spraying/chemical application, harvest operations, maintenance/repair) within their first 18 months.

9. Recommended Hiring Process (Step-by-Step)

9.1 Where to Post

CHANNEL	COST	PRIORITY	BEST FOR
MSTC career board + direct outreach	Free	🔴 Highest	All positions
Job Center of Wisconsin (online)	Free	🔴 High	All positions
Facebook (ELC page + local groups)	Free-\$100/boost	🔴 High	All positions
Indeed	Free (basic) / \$5-\$15/day (sponsored)	🟡 Medium	Year-round positions
AgHires	\$900/mo or per-post	🟡 Medium	Equipment operator, senior roles
FFA chapter advisors	Free	🟡 Medium	Summer/seasonal, young workers
Local churches/community boards	Free	🟢 Low cost/effort	Seasonal
Craigslist (Wausau/Central WI)	Free	🟢 Low effort	Seasonal
VFW/American Legion	Free	🟢 Targeted	Veteran candidates

9.2 Screening Process

1. **Application received** (resume, Google Form, phone call, or walk-in)
2. **Pre-screen checklist** (5 minutes):
 3. Valid driver's license? ✓/✗
 4. Available for required schedule? ✓/✗
 5. Physical ability confirmed? ✓/✗
 6. Relevant experience (any level)? ✓/✗
7. How did they hear about the job?
8. **Phone screen** (10–15 minutes) — Quick conversation to assess communication, reliability signals, genuine interest

9. **In-person interview + farm tour** (30–45 minutes) — Always include a walk around the operation. Watch how they react to the environment. Ask them to hop on a piece of equipment if they claim experience.
10. **Reference check** — Call at least one prior employer. Ask specifically about attendance and reliability.
11. **Offer** — Make it within 48 hours of interview. Good candidates don't wait around.

9.3 Interview Questions

Use these 10 questions, adapted to the specific role:

1. **“Tell me about a time you had to work in tough weather or uncomfortable conditions. How’d you handle it?”** — Tests grit and honesty.
2. **“What equipment have you operated? Walk me through a typical day at your last job.”** — Reveals actual experience level (vs. resume inflation).
3. **“What would you do if a piece of equipment broke down in the field and Gil wasn’t around?”** — Tests problem-solving and mechanical aptitude.
4. **“Harvest season means long days and weekend work for about 6–8 weeks. How does that fit with your life?”** — Uncovers schedule conflicts before they become no-shows.
5. **“Why are you interested in farm work specifically, rather than another job?”** — Tests genuine interest vs. “I’ll take anything.”
6. **“Tell me about a time you had to work closely with a small team. What was your role?”** — Small crew dynamics matter enormously.
7. **“What’s your transportation situation? How far is the drive?”** — Long commutes are the #1 predictor of early turnover in rural jobs.
8. **“How do you feel about learning new technology? We use GPS-guided equipment and automated systems.”** — Tests willingness to learn and adapt.
9. **“What would make this the kind of job you’d want to stick with for a few years?”** — Reveals what they value. Lets you address it.
10. **“Do you have any certifications — CDL, pesticide applicator, first aid? Would you be interested in getting any?”** — Identifies growth-oriented candidates.

Red flags to watch for: - Can't explain gaps in employment - Badmouths every previous employer - Asks about time off before asking about the job - No transportation plan - Vague about availability during key periods

9.4 Trial Period Structure

- **First 2 weeks:** Orientation and basic training. Paired with Gil or a senior employee at all times. Low-pressure, learning-focused.
- **Weeks 3–6:** Increasing independence. Assigned specific responsibilities. Daily check-ins with Gil (5 minutes: “How’s it going? What questions do you have?”).
- **Day 45 (6-week review):** Formal sit-down. “Here’s what’s going well, here’s what we need to see improve, here’s your path forward.” Decision point: keep, adjust, or part ways.
- **Day 90 (probationary end):** Full review. Confirm permanent status, discuss skills progression ladder placement, set 6-month goals.

9.5 Onboarding Checklist

Day 1: - [] Welcome and introductions (entire team) - [] Farm tour (complete property walk — bogs, buildings, equipment) - [] Safety orientation (PPE, hazard areas, emergency procedures, nearest hospital) - [] Paperwork (W-4, I-9, emergency contact, direct deposit) - [] Issue work gear (boots, gloves, rain gear, hat) - [] Review schedule, pay structure, and bonus program - [] Assign “buddy” (Gil or senior employee)

Week 1: - [] Equipment orientation (what’s what, what they can/can’t touch yet) - [] Introduction to cranberry basics (the crop cycle, what we’re doing and why) - [] Review safety procedures for current season’s activities - [] First supervised equipment operation (if applicable) - [] End-of-week check-in: “How was your first week?”

Month 1: - [] Complete basic training on primary job functions - [] Begin independent tasks (supervised at first) - [] Review and sign off on safety certifications - [] Discuss interest in additional training/certifications - [] 30-day check-in with John or Gil

10. 90-Day Action Plan

Week 1–2: Launch

ACTION	OWNER	STATUS
Finalize job descriptions (use drafts from Section 7)	John	
Post on Job Center of Wisconsin	John	
Post on Facebook (ELC page + 3 local groups)	John/Henry	
Post on Indeed (free listing, consider \$10/day sponsor)	John	
Contact MSTC — email Ag Department (use draft from Section 4.1)	John	
Contact Lincoln High School FFA advisor	John/Gil	
Print flyers, post at VFW, churches, Fleet Farm	Gil	
Set up Google Form pre-screening questionnaire	Henry	
Set up Calendly link for interview scheduling	Henry	
Review and confirm pay ranges with accountant/budget	John	

Week 3–4: Screen and Interview

ACTION	OWNER	STATUS
Review applications daily (don't let them sit)	John/Gil	
Phone screen qualified candidates (same day if possible)	John/Gil	
Schedule in-person interviews + farm tours	John	
Conduct interviews using question bank from Section 9.3	John + Gil	
Check references on top candidates	John	
Make offers within 48 hours of interview	John	
Post on AgHires if local channels underperform	John	
Follow up with MSTC re: internship partnership	John	

Month 2: Hire and Onboard

ACTION	OWNER	STATUS
Onboard new hires using checklist from Section 9.5	Gil	
Pair each new hire with a buddy/mentor	Gil	
Daily check-ins during first 2 weeks	Gil	
2-week informal review	Gil + John	
Begin skills assessment for progression ladder placement	Gil	
Start planning seasonal harvest hiring (if applicable)	John	
Evaluate MSTC partnership — schedule farm tour date	John	

Month 3: Evaluate and Adjust

ACTION	OWNER	STATUS
45-day formal review for all new hires	John + Gil	
Assess recruiting channel effectiveness (where did hires come from?)	John	
Adjust pay/benefits if having trouble attracting candidates	John	
Document lessons learned (what worked, what didn't)	John/Henry	
Plan for next hiring cycle (seasonal harvest if not yet done)	John	
90-day review and permanent status decision	John + Gil	
Update job postings based on what resonated with candidates	John	

Appendix: Quick Reference Contacts

RESOURCE	CONTACT	PHONE/URL
MSTC Wisconsin Rapids Campus	500 32nd St N, WR, WI 54494	(715) 422-5300
MSTC Ag Faculty (Farm Operation)	Teri Raatz, BS, MS	Via MSTC main number
Job Center of Wisconsin (WR)	320 W Grand Ave, Suite 102, WR 54495	(715) 422-5000
Advance Wisconsin Employment (WDB)	3118 Post Road, Suite A, Stevens Point 54481	(715) 422-4716
AgHires	Online	aghires.com
WI DATCP Veteran Farmer Program	Online	datcp.wi.gov
WI Dept of Veterans Affairs	Online	dva.wi.gov
Wood County UW-Extension (4-H)	Online	wood.extension.wisc.edu
Wisconsin FFA (chapter locator)	Online	wisconsinaged.org
WI State Cranberry Growers Assn	Online	(715) 423-2070 / wiscran.org
Seso Labor (H-2A platform)	Online	sesolabor.com
Job Center of Wisconsin (online)	Online	jobcenterofwisconsin.com

Report prepared February 2026. Wage data sourced from USDA NASS Farm Labor Survey (April 2025), Wisconsin Ag Connection, Indeed, USDA Economic Research Service, and American Farm Bureau Federation. All contacts and pricing should be verified before use — information may change.