

CONFIDENTIAL RESEARCH REPORT

Farm Hiring Process Improvement

Comprehensive Recruiting & Retention Strategy

Prepared for Elm Lake Cranberry

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Prepared by Henry Clawson, Executive Assistant

Table of Contents

1.	Executive Summary
2.	Wisconsin Agricultural Labor Market
3.	Pay Benchmarks
4.	Recruiting Channels
5.	H-2A Visa Program Analysis
6.	AI-Assisted Hiring Tools
7.	Draft Job Postings
8.	Retention Strategy
9.	Recommended Hiring Process
10.	90-Day Action Plan

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, every hire matters.

Key Findings

- The Lake Region average farm wage reached **\$20.92/hr** in April 2025, up \$1.75 from the prior year.
- **Mid-State Technical College (MSTC)** in Wisconsin Rapids is the single highest-value recruiting channel.
- H-2A is **not cost-effective** for an operation of this size (effective cost: \$38–49/hr per worker).
- A structured **retention bonus program** (\$1.50–\$2.00/hr banked) combined with a **skills progression ladder** can dramatically reduce turnover.
- Three ready-to-post job descriptions are included.

2. Wisconsin Agricultural Labor Market

Current Labor Shortage

- **52,000 workers** hired in the Lake Region during April 2025 reference week
- Wisconsin farm employment estimated at ~24,000 statewide
- Wood County unemployment below 4% consistently — no surplus labor pool
- Farm wages: \$17.23/hr (general) to \$19.07/hr (equipment operators) nationally

Competing Industries

INDUSTRY	TYPICAL WAGE	KEY APPEAL
Amazon / Warehousing	\$18–\$22/hr	Climate-controlled, consistent hours, benefits
Construction	\$20–\$30/hr	Higher hourly, seasonal overlap
Manufacturing	\$18–\$25/hr	Year-round stability, benefits
Kwik Trip / Retail	\$15–\$18/hr + benefits	Low physical demand, advancement
Dairy Operations	\$16–\$20/hr + housing	Year-round work, housing included

Cranberry Labor Cycle

- **Year-round (3–4 employees):** Bog maintenance, frost protection, irrigation, equipment
- **Spring (Apr–Jun):** Frost watches, pump operation, weed management
- **Peak (Sep–Nov):** Harvest — need 2–4 additional seasonal workers
- **Winter (Dec–Mar):** Reduced crew — ice sanding, equipment repair, pruning

3. Pay Benchmarks

Current Market Rates (Central Wisconsin, 2025)

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

Recommended ELC Pay Structure

POSITION	RECOMMENDED RANGE	RATIONALE
Farm Worker / Operations Associate	\$17.50–\$20.00/hr	Must beat Amazon/Kwik Trip floor
Equipment Operator	\$20.00–\$24.00/hr	Competes directly with construction
Seasonal Harvest	\$17.00–\$19.00/hr + bonus	Bonus structure is the differentiator

Benefits That Matter

- 1. **Housing assistance** — even \$200–\$400/mo stipend is huge
- 2. **End-of-season bonus** — single most effective retention tool
- 3. **Flexible scheduling** — "work hard, go home when done"
- 4. **Equipment/gear provided** — boots, gloves, rain gear
- 5. **Health insurance contribution** — \$200–\$300/mo toward ACA plan
- 6. **Fuel/transportation help** — gas card or mileage supplement
- 7. **Paid training/certifications** — CDL, pesticide applicator

4. Recruiting Channels

4.1 Mid-State Technical College — TOP PRIORITY

MSTC's Wisconsin Rapids campus produces graduates with directly relevant training: Farm Operation, Agribusiness, Agronomy, and Ag Diesel programs. **This is ELC's single most valuable recruiting partner.**

Address: 500 32nd Street North, Wisconsin Rapids, WI 54494 | **Phone:** (715) 422-5300

4.2 Additional Channels

CHANNEL	COST	PRIORITY	BEST FOR
MSTC outreach	Free	 Highest	All positions
Job Center of Wisconsin	Free	 High	All positions
Facebook (ELC page + groups)	Free–\$100	 High	All positions
Indeed	Free–\$15/day	 Medium	Year-round
AgHires	\$900/mo	 Medium	Equipment/senior
FFA chapters (District #19)	Free	 Medium	Seasonal, young
VFW/American Legion	Free	 Targeted	Veterans
Churches/community boards	Free	 Low effort	Seasonal

FFA Chapters — District #19

1. Wisconsin Rapids–Lincoln FFA (hometown)
2. Pittsville FFA (~15 miles west)
3. Auburndale FFA (~12 miles northwest)
4. Marshfield FFA (~25 miles northwest)
5. Stevens Point FFA (~25 miles east)

5. H-2A Visa Program

Cost Analysis (3 H-2A Workers, 4-Month Season)

COST CATEGORY	PER WORKER	TOTAL (3 WORKERS)
Attorney/agent fees	\$1,500–\$2,500	\$4,500–\$7,500
USCIS filing + visa fees	\$710	\$2,130
Transportation	\$400–\$650	\$1,200–\$1,950
Housing	\$9,000–\$13,000	\$27,000–\$39,000
Wages at AEWR (\$18.15/hr)	\$12,342	\$37,026
Workers' comp + meals	\$2,300–\$3,700	\$6,900–\$11,100
TOTAL		\$79,256–\$99,706

Verdict: Almost certainly not viable at current scale. Effective hourly cost per H-2A worker: \$38–\$49/hr — roughly double a domestic worker with retention bonus. Housing is the dealbreaker.

Better Alternatives

- **Pooling with other growers** — joint H-2A petitions through WSCGA
- **H-2A labor contractors** — \$25–\$35/hr but no housing/admin burden
- **H-2B** for non-agricultural seasonal tasks (warehouse, processing)

6. AI-Assisted Hiring Tools

Recommended approach for ELC's scale:

- **Job descriptions:** Use Claude/ChatGPT (free) to draft and refine
- **Screening:** Free Google Form with 5–8 qualifying questions
- **Scheduling:** Free Calendly link for interview booking

No need for enterprise tools at this scale.

7. Draft Job Postings

Farm Operations Associate (\$17.50–\$20.00/hr)

Full-Time, Year-Round

Maintain and manage cranberry bogs year-round: flood management, frost protection, dike maintenance, weed control. Operate and maintain farm equipment. Work with GPS-guided equipment and precision agriculture tools.

Requirements: Reliable, comfortable outdoors, valid driver's license, ability to lift 50+ lbs. No prior cranberry experience required.

Equipment Operator (\$20.00–\$24.00/hr)

Full-Time, Year-Round

Operate tractors, mowers, harvesters, berry pumps, sprayers, and trucks. Perform routine equipment maintenance and repairs. Manage bog flooding, frost protection, and irrigation systems.

Requirements: 2+ years equipment experience, strong mechanical skills, CDL preferred, comfort with technology.

Seasonal Harvest Worker (\$17.00–\$19.00/hr + Bonus)

Seasonal, September–November

Assist with wet and dry harvest operations. Operate berry pumps, conveyors, and loading equipment. Drive trucks and tractors if qualified.

Bonus: Harvest completion bonus for staying through end of season. Perfect for students, hunters, retirees, or anyone wanting something different.

8. Retention Strategy

End-of-Season Completion Bonus

WORKER TYPE	BONUS MECHANISM	EXAMPLE PAYOUT
Year-round employees	\$1.50/hr banked, paid Dec 15	~\$3,120/year
Seasonal harvest	\$2.00/hr banked, paid at completion	~\$1,040
Equipment operators	\$1.50/hr + \$500 harvest bonus	~\$3,620/year

Skills Progression Ladder

LEVEL	TITLE	PAY RANGE
1	Farm Worker	\$17.50–\$18.50/hr
2	Operations Associate	\$18.50–\$20.00/hr
3	Equipment Operator	\$20.00–\$23.00/hr
4	Senior Operator / Lead	\$23.00–\$26.00/hr
5	Assistant Farm Manager	\$55,000–\$65,000 salary

Team Culture

- Weekly team breakfast or lunch during season
- End-of-harvest celebration — hand out bonus checks publicly
- Empower Gil as mentor, not just director
- Ask workers for improvement ideas — give credit publicly
- Mark seasonal milestones (first flood, first harvest day, last truck)

9. Hiring Process

Step-by-Step

1. **Application received** (resume, Google Form, phone, or walk-in)
2. **Pre-screen checklist** (5 min): license, availability, physical ability, experience
3. **Phone screen** (15 min): communication, reliability, genuine interest
4. **In-person interview + farm tour** (30–45 min): always include property walk
5. **Reference check**: call at least one prior employer
6. **Offer**: make within 48 hours — good candidates don't wait

Trial Period

- **Weeks 1-2**: Orientation, paired with mentor, learning-focused
- **Weeks 3-6**: Increasing independence, daily check-ins
- **Day 45**: Formal review — keep, adjust, or part ways
- **Day 90**: Full review, confirm permanent status, set goals

10. 90-Day Action Plan

Weeks 1-2: Launch

- Finalize job descriptions, post on Job Center of WI, Facebook, Indeed
- Contact MSTC Agriculture Department and Lincoln High School FFA
- Print flyers for VFW, churches, Fleet Farm
- Set up Google Form pre-screening + Calendly scheduling

Weeks 3-4: Screen and Interview

- Review applications daily — don't let them sit
- Phone screen same day, schedule in-person interviews
- Make offers within 48 hours

Month 2: Hire and Onboard

- Onboard using checklist, pair with buddy/mentor
- Daily check-ins during first 2 weeks
- 2-week informal review

Month 3: Evaluate and Adjust

- 45-day formal review for all new hires
- Assess which recruiting channels produced hires
- Document lessons learned

Quick Reference Contacts

RESOURCE	CONTACT	PHONE/URL
MSTC Wisconsin Rapids	500 32nd St N	(715) 422-5300
Job Center of Wisconsin	320 W Grand Ave	(715) 422-5000
AgHires	Online	aghires.com
WI DATCP Veteran Farmer	Online	datcp.wi.gov
WI Cranberry Growers Assn	Online	(715) 423-2070

Report prepared February 2026. Wage data sourced from USDA NASS Farm Labor Survey, Wisconsin Ag Connection, Indeed, and USDA Economic Research Service.