

VALUE OF MIGRANT WORKFORCE UNDERESTIMATED



FAMILIAR FACES: One advantage of working with the H2A program is that the same workers often return each season, which means there's less training time involved in harvest activities.

Midwestern consumers shopping at Hy-Vee, Walmart, County Market, Econo Foods and other major grocery chains probably don't realize that a significant portion of the fresh vegetables they buy wouldn't be available without migrant labor. Farmers such as the Daniels family in Columbus can quickly explain the negative impact their business would suffer if migrant labor wasn't available.

"We operate the largest vegetable farm in Nebraska. Eighty percent of vegetables grown on our 500-acre farm are purchased wholesale by major Midwestern food chains," Kelly Daniels says. "When we were farming 900 acres, we shipped produce as far as Florida, Texas and Boston. We downsized to 500 acres this year and now ship vegetables to major Midwestern cities such as Kansas City and Omaha."

All the produce raised on the Daniels farm must be hand-harvested and packaged. Even some planting is done by hand.

"In the past, we hired domestic laborers that were often of Hispanic descent," Daniels says. "However, due to a high turnover rate and decreasing job applicants, in 2009 my father decided to work through the federal government's H2A program for guest-worker visas. We've worked with a Virginia company that helps us hire 48 workers each year."

The H2A program allows U.S. employers to bring foreign nationals to this country to fill temporary agricultural jobs when they can't find local workers. The Danielses have to demonstrate need for the workers and complete an annual application process to schedule their arrival.

FEDERAL PROGRAM HELPS

The federally administrated program requires employers meet specific qualifications, including verification of the following: The job offered is of a temporary or seasonal nature; there are not sufficient U.S. workers who are able, willing, qualified and available to do the temporary work; and the employment of H2A workers will not adversely affect wages and working conditions of similarly employed U.S. workers.

Prospective workers must also complete an application process and reside in one of the specified eligible countries.

"There are a lot of good things about H2A," Daniels says. "We provide housing for the workers so we don't have issues with people not showing up. The wage rate is set by H2A regulations. Since we began working through the program, we've been able to have the same workers here each year. That's a benefit because training time is much less, and the workers are more efficient because they know what's expected."

When the Danielses used domestic labor, they rarely had anyone return for a second year. They also had to weed out workers who weren't able to do the work or didn't come to work regularly.

"Toward the end of the season, people would quit and take another job because they knew the work here would be ending. That didn't work for us because we still needed workers through our entire growing season," Daniels says. "There used to be a good-sized pool of workers to draw from. In recent years, since border security has tight-