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Survey Sheds Light on Green Industry Labor Force



OSU Extension specialist Hannah Mathers has lead several projects to empower the Latino workforce in Ohio's nursery industry.

Despite over 40 percent of green industry sales going to labor, little is known about the demographic makeup of its workforce. But an Ohio State University Department of Horticulture and Crop Science study is shedding new light on the subject, which may prove invaluable to businesses when it comes to communication and training.

Hannah Mathers, an OSU Extension nursery and landscape specialist, and graduate student **Alejandra Acuña** conducted a multi-state survey of 1,548 nursery employees to characterize the green industry labor force. Until now, basic information, such as nationality, work experience, legal status, education level and salary -- widely available for agriculture -- had not been collected specifically for the green industry. States surveyed include Ohio, Michigan, Delaware, Tennessee, Florida, Indiana, Kentucky, Arizona and Rhode Island.

"It's surprising that so much of the gross sales are going to labor salaries, but so little is known of that labor force," said Mathers, who holds a partial research appointment with the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. "It's been assumed that the majority of the green industry labor force is Spanish-speaking, but there was no formal information to support that belief. Now that information is available."



A multi-state survey of the green industry shows that 70 percent of the labor force is Spanish-speaking or of Hispanic origin, and over half are from Mexico.

According to the results of the survey, 70 percent of the industry's labor force is Spanish-speaking or of Hispanic origin, and over half are from Mexico. Hispanic migrant laborers dominated the green industry in all of the states surveyed, with the exception of Indiana. Mathers speculated that the data collected is representative of the green industry labor force throughout the country.

"The greatest impact that is changing the face of the green industry, and agriculture

overall, is the migrant labor force," said Mathers. "Businesses can be more successful if they take a greater interest in their labor force."

The following are some survey results:

- Over 70 percent filling green industry jobs are general laborers aged 18-34 with middle school being the highest level of education.
- The number of women entering the labor force is increasing. In 2003, less than 5 percent of migrant laborers were women. Now that number has risen to almost half. Mathers said such a significant finding has implications for training and health benefits.
- Only 22 percent of workers understand English, creating communication barriers in the workplace. Such barriers can impact job performance and productivity, said Mathers.
- Job position is highly correlated with language proficiency. Workers with high English proficiency held advanced jobs.
- The majority of those surveyed do not have health benefits (70 percent), or they do not know what benefits they do have. "Such information indicates to me that employers are not communicating to them the benefits they are entitled to, or they are working without proper documentation," said Mathers.
- Nursery workers surveyed are receiving less than the average U.S. hourly earnings. Over 75 percent are earning between \$6 and \$10 per hour. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average hourly earning of non-supervisory workers during 2007 is \$17.16. Almost 70 percent of respondents indicated that a higher salary would improve their job environment.
- The primary source of a worker's technical information was the supervisor, indicating that the worker is receiving little to no information outside of his or her working environment. Sixty percent of nursery workers have not received training courses related to their work, and only 8 percent have access to such courses.
- Nearly 80 percent of the workers were interested in attending work-related courses or classes. They indicated they would welcome training in the areas of identification, such as plants, insects, diseases and weeds, as well as equipment safety.

Mathers said that such knowledge about the green industry's labor force is the first step in improving the well-being of migrant workers, building working relationships with employers and boosting overall productivity and efficiency of landscape, garden and nursery businesses.

However, what opportunities are offered to the industry's labor force may vary from one business to the other; what may work for one business may not be suited for another. According to another survey conducted by Mathers and Acuña, the diversity of culture, language and experience level among the workforce varied within Ohio's geographical regions and among nurseries within those regions. For example, workers in northwest Ohio are predominantly Mexican, but workers in northeast Ohio are Puerto Rican.

"Such differences in culture and lifestyle indicate that across-the-board training is not as effective as tailoring programs for each specific group," said Mathers. "Results also seemed to indicate that workers at different nurseries had different needs, creating challenges of delivering the right training programs and technical information to the proper audiences."

Why is such information about the green industry's workforce so important? The answer is due to sheer numbers. Nearly 15 percent of the United States population is Hispanic, seeking work in service-oriented and labor-intensive businesses, like the green industry. The

greenhouse industry is the fifth most important agricultural sector in the country. In Ohio, labor demand is anticipated to increase an average of 3 to 5 percent over the next several years.



Hannah Mathers work with the Hispanic labor force earned her the 2007 College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences Bill Williams Diversity Award.

Mathers, who recently received the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences Bill Williams Diversity Award, recognizes the importance of diversity within such a rapidly growing industry.

"Embracing diversity was driven home to me by my high school drama teacher, Pat Quigley," says Mathers. "When working as a team or in an industry that is worth \$3.5 billion in Ohio, the need to understand the skills, traits, strengths and weaknesses of those who lend a hand to its success is vital."

Mathers believes the work with the Hispanic audience is also important beyond the issue of diversity. "We have an increasing need to show impact with our outreach and Extension programming. Social research methods used in our surveys are an ideal way to evaluate and raise the scholarly aspect of Extension programming," said Mathers. "Studies like ours bridge the gap between Extension and research."

Both surveys are just one of numerous efforts by OSU Extension to broaden the knowledge of employers and help Spanish-speaking workers, not only in the green industry, but in other agricultural segments such as the dairy and wine/grape industries, specialty crops, fruit production, and general on-farm labor.

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the Department of Horticulture and Crop Science.

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