Good to Great – Improving Labor Management on Fruit and Vegetable Farms in New York State

Project Director: Elizabeth Higgins, Cornell University

Situation
A family-run farm in New York State is located on land that has been an orchard since 1802. The current farmers have had their operation there for over 20 years. They offer Pick Your Own apples and a farm stand with their produce, as well as produce from surrounding farms. They realized that there were things they should do to improve the management of their seasonal staff but had never taken the time required to make changes. During the winter of 2017-2018, the wife of this farm couple attended workshops on improving labor management, which were provided through the Good to Great project. Four workshops were offered: Making Your Farm a Great Place to Work, What’s My Job?, Keeping Good Staff When Money Is Tight, and Managing Risk as an Ag Employer.

Outcomes
Following the workshops and prior to the beginning of the season, this producer was inspired to write clear job descriptions/job expectations for the orchard’s seasonal staff, and to develop more clearly written management guidelines. She and her husband also held employee meetings.

Impacts
Unfortunately, just at the start of the season these producers needed to take an extended, unplanned absence from the farm, which ordinarily would have been a management crisis. However, thanks to their work and implementation of resources from the trainings, there was a framework ready and in place for their manager to utilize to guide decision-making in their absence. This allowed for effective management, and the season went smoothly until they were able to return to work. They have credited the Good to Great workshops with “saving the Orchard’s season” by giving them the resources and motivation to create tools to reduce their staff’s reliance on them for routine decision-making.

This farm couple credited what they learned, and then implemented following the labor management workshops, with saving their orchard’s season.
“Educating America’s farmers and ranchers to manage the unique risks of producing food for the world’s table.”

Extension Risk Management Education (ERME) is delivered through four regional centers that provide grant funding and leadership within their regions.

Projects are producer-focused, results-based and encourage public-private partnerships. Funded projects must identify targeted results that will help producers manage risk and then describe how the project will measure those results.

Extension Risk Management Education has funded innovative programs that have generated tangible results for producers in every state. ERME is committed to funding results, providing transparent accountability, and encouraging collaboration. View the accomplishments of all funded projects on our website. http://ExtensionRME.org