



Diversification Benefits Farm Workers and the Farm Business

Inaba Farms, a third-generation family farm in Washington's Yakima Valley, consists of 1,200 acres of concord grapes and vegetables, including sweet corn, asparagus, onions, bell peppers, melons, tomatoes, and cucumbers. During the growing season, crops are shipped fresh daily to points in the western United States and Canada.

A while back, the farm found itself without labor during key harvest periods. At the time, they grew three main crops: bell peppers, concord grapes, and sweet corn. When the hop harvest began in the region, they lost half their workers, and with the apple harvest, they lost the other half. Hop harvest offered more hours per day, and apple harvest, on a piece rate, offered higher pay. How could the Inabas retain their labor force?

After much deliberation, the Inabas decided to diversify their enterprise mix to offer more workers season-long employment. With a diversified crop mix, they now provide employment for half of their workers for six months or more. They also added organic production, so now there is a major off-season enterprise—compost production. Off-season activities include securing and processing compostable materials for use as soil amendments in organic production.

In addition, in 1989 the Inabas began building farm-worker housing, taking advantage of low-interest loans. As part of their efforts to provide longer term employment, the Inabas pay some of their farm workers to build the housing on the off-season. The program continues on a cash-available basis and has become a model for the region. The Inabas even provide farm housing tours for members of the agricultural community. Other innovative activities include holding harvest festivals for their employees and making contributions to their community. They regularly provide fresh produce to their neighbors.

Longer employment opportunities and quality housing have made Inaba Farms a sought after place of employment. Today, they experience very low turnover and see the same people coming back year after year. The Inabas realize they need good employees to stay competitive, and they feel their investments in enterprise diversity, housing, and their community are paying off.

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