



The New York Lady Bug

Updates from the Agriculture Labor Program

Volume II, Issue 2

October 1st, 2013



Agriculture Diversification in the Hudson Valley

by Katya Pineda

Growing up in El Salvador, my grandfather always said, “Never put all your eggs in the same basket.” As a kid I couldn’t help but wonder what did he really mean by that? Is he calling me a chicken? He was a first-generation farmer whose success was determined in great measure by his ability to understand the importance of diversification: he planted corn, string beans and squash, ran a small scale dairy farm producing its own artisan cheeses and dairy products and he traded goods with neighboring countries.

In the past decades, this same understanding is becoming more and more predominant among the Hudson Valley region growers. There is an increasing tendency for agricultural diversification. Farmers are diversifying as a way to ensure a viable economic return while meeting consumer’s demands and avoiding the complete loss of their crops when the weather is less than favorable, among other reasons.



Interestingly enough, it seems that this renewed understanding is prevalently higher among the younger breed of farmers.

A 52-year-old first-generation farmer from the Orange County black dirt region who started his business 20 years ago with a focus on onions has now expanded to producing corn, lettuce and soybeans. He explains that his decision came as a need. The onion crop is sensitive to

In this issue:

Agriculture Diversification in the Hudson Valley	1
Welcome to New SMA	3
Director’s Notes	4

Agriculture Diversification in the Hudson Valley (Cont.)

drastic weather changes: “One extra inch of rain and you’re done, your whole onion crop is gone.” The loss is not only for the farmer, but also for the workers and consumers, as employment rates go down.

He explains that by incorporating corn, lettuce and soy crops into his business, he is now able to provide steadier jobs to his employees. “When we are done with planting onions, there is not much to do until it’s time for harvest. I was forced to send my guys home and at harvest struggle to find enough workers. Now, I can keep them for almost the entire year.” In return, by keeping his workers busy, the grower is assured that he will have the labor force necessary to harvest the onion crop.

Diversification of agriculture is the term used to address the change from one dominant crop to the production of a number of crops. This is frequently done to meet ever increasing demand for both cash crop and food production.

Meeting that increasing demand, specifically demands from retail markets like farm stands, farmers markets, specialty stores and restaurants, is precisely one of the incentives behind diversification in the Hudson Valley Region.

Another grower in Dutchess County is a third-generation farmer who recalls realizing the

need to incorporate new products to his brother’s farm stand soon after taking over an apple orchard over 20 years ago. That motivated him to introduce peaches, cherries, blueberries, strawberries and a variety of vegetables to his crop. He transitioned his business from wholesale to retail by selling his products in 7 farm markets and by converting his farm into a U-pick.

The grower indicated that another added bonus of diversification is that in some cases it allows for crop rotation, causing the soil to renew its nutrients which at the same time benefits the crops.

Years have passed, and I finally understand the meaning of Grandpa’s wisdom: He was encouraging me to be always

prepared and to always have a plan B! Is there a better context to apply this concept than in farming?

Agricultural diversification is becoming a viable alternative for many growers as they respond to the challenges they face in farming. It reduces their risk of losing an entire crop, it increases the number of rural jobs and it gives the consumer a wider and improved nutritional selection to choose from. A win-win situation!

It would be interesting to revisit this trend 10 years from now to find out how many farmers chose to leave “all their eggs in the same basket” and the number of those that chose the path of diversification.



Welcoming a New State Monitor Advocate

Laura Tramontana, a former Agriculture Labor Specialist in the Syracuse area, has accepted a position as State Monitor Advocate. Laura has worked with the migrant and seasonal farm worker community since 2005, first as a real estate agent who specialized in transitioning farm workers to the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania area, evaluating housing for proximity to employment opportunities and collaborating with local organizations to enable clients to achieve long-term stability and success. Later, Laura worked for a non-profit organization called WATCH, where she critically reviewed the Minnesota judicial system's service to persons of all races, cultures and genders, specifically watching for cultural sensitivity to refugee and farm worker populations.

Laura also worked in a Pennsylvania law practice where she protected the interests of business owners by providing strategic business planning and concurrently handled cases that involved employee rights and safety. Most recently, Laura has worked for the state Department of Labor as an Agriculture Labor Specialist, where she delivered Career Center services to workers and employers. Laura's experience representing both employer and employee interests is a particular asset to her role as the Monitor Advocate because employer and employee interests go hand in hand. When an employer comes into labor law compliance, the employer protects his or her liability and the employee receives protections required by law. Laura's experience enables her to objectively assess employment services and to provide practical recommendations for improvement.

Laura attended Pennsylvania State University, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in English with a minor in Spanish, and a Juris Doctor degree. Laura is admitted to the Pennsylvania Bar. While at Pennsylvania State University, the Dickinson School of Law, she was certified as a Public Interest Advocate by the Miller Center for Public Interest Advocacy. She speaks English and Spanish.



Agriculture Labor Program

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A Note from Our Director

It is with great excitement that I write my first letter to you as the director of the Division of Immigrant Policies and Affairs (DIPA). Previously, as the State Monitor Advocate, I monitored and evaluated the employment services and other protections offered through the New York State Department of Labor, ensuring that they were being equitably offered to migrant and seasonal farm workers. Serving as State Monitor Advocate was personally fulfilling as I could see the direct impact that my work had on the lives of migrant and seasonal farm workers and their families. Transitioning to Assistant Director and now Director will be natural, in part, because the goals of DIPA are similar.

While the State Monitor Advocate role and the Agriculture Labor Program are separate, they share a commitment to assisting and serving the migrant and seasonal farm working community. It is also the belief of both programs that agriculture should thrive in New York State and that supporting the agricultural employer is critical. Supporting both the employer and the workers is essential for New York State to have a strong agricultural economy. I am certain that Laura Tramontana shares in that vision. As an Agriculture Labor Specialist, she was able to educate farmers and assist farm workers in a balanced and equitable way. I am proud to welcome Laura Tramontana into this role. I believe that she is more than qualified and capable and will be a resource to employers and farm workers throughout New York State.

For the last fourteen months, I have been serving both as the State Monitor Advocate and the Assistant Director of DIPA, focusing much of my efforts on the Agriculture Labor Program. It will be exciting for me to focus all of my energy on ensuring that DIPA is the most effective division that it can be, offering meaningful services to both workers and employers. I look forward to being a resource to you.

Sincerely,

Jeanette Lazelle

