



Building a sustainable team

Working conditions and worker participation are crucial pieces of a company's sustainability plan



By Dylan Rivera

Mark Krautmann, owner of Heritage Seedlings near Salem, Ore., can't be everywhere on his 120 acres all the time.

That is why sustainable practices – particularly those pertaining to human resources – are so important to the success of his business.

Employees make many small decisions every day, such as whether to fertilize a field with a rainstorm approaching, or how to apply a chemical safely. In Krautmann's view, these decisions determine not only the profitability

of Heritage Seedlings, but its potential to grow as a sustainable nursery.

"It depends on leadership right at the top," he said, "but at the end of the day, it depends on leadership down in the field where decisions get made. It's that kind of stewardship decision that I would never see or hear about, but by our collaboration on these issues, there begins to be a standard that's real clear."

For Krautmann and a growing number of nursery owners, sustainability means more than just a set of

practices used to grow plants and care for the earth. It means creating a closer relationship with workers, so the entire organization is moving in a better, more sustainable direction.

It's about working conditions that help field hands gain careers and the sense of belonging that can help nurture the communities near nurseries.

Food Alliance, a Portland-based nonprofit that certifies sustainable farms and ranches, is developing a nursery



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program in the next year and a half. The group is working with Salmon-Safe, another Portland group, which certifies farms for steps to preserve water quality and native fish.

The Oregon Association of Nurseries (OAN) suggested the idea of a nursery-specific program last year as a potential marketing tool for the industry's sustainability leaders, according to Whitney Rideout, OAN business development manager. Perhaps even more importantly, it could also spread information on best practices, she said.

Food Alliance and Salmon-Safe will develop the standard with input from the industry. The OAN will help with outreach to nurseries for expertise and to incorporate them in pilot projects, Rideout said.

Some nurseries may not want to become certified, but having a nursery specific standard available for review on the web could help disseminate ideas for best practices and perhaps encourage some to consider certification.

"They're helping all of our members out by producing that compendium of practices that anyone can access," Rideout said.

'Bigger than just organic'

The workplace implications of sustainability are not necessarily obvious, according to Leigh Geschwill, wholesale manager for F & B Farms and Nursery in Woodburn, Ore.

Too often, folks think of sustainability as a synonym for organic or environmental, when really there's a lot more to it.

"Sustainability is bigger than just organic and it's bigger than just the environmental movement," Geschwill says. "I think one of the things we didn't fully get, until we got into the process, was the worker component."

To gain a marketing edge for sustainability and learn about best practices, F & B Farms and Nursery put its operation through the VeriFlora Certified Sustainably Grown program, which sets

standards for production of flowers and potted plants.

Geschwill was surprised to learn that VeriFlora includes prohibitions against slavery and indentured servitude. These practices are considered artifacts of history in the United States, yet they persist in developing countries.

Though those aren't big factors in Oregon, the underlying principle is the same, she said. There are employers who take advantage of people who don't know what the rules and regulations are.

"It's good to get the message that part of sustainability is ensuring that workers have safe and fair employment," Geschwill said.

Most of the elements of a sustainable workplace add up to practices and policies that help worker safety. F & B already had implemented many of the standards that VeriFlora specified.

The company has long had a worker training program in place, for example, ensuring tractor drivers review safety rules once a year. Training also instructs workers in state regulations and health advice, such as washing work clothes separate from the family's laundry to avoid spreading farm chemicals.

The public sometimes views the agricultural sector as abusive to workers, Geschwill said.

"For the most part, we're trying to make sure that people are safe and that they're taken care of and not bringing pesticides home to their families and that kind of thing," she said.

The nursery clarified its child labor policy, which is more robust than state law, Geschwill said. The policy requires parental notification when minors are employed.

A quality committee is creating visual standards to show proper and improper ways of performing common tasks. Management removed tripping hazards and painted doorstops and other elements bright red to make them more visible.

A third-party trainer visits F & B every two weeks to lead training sessions. The trainers are also available to receive complaints and comments from the workers.

“We want them to know that if someone’s harassing them or if they have a problem they can come talk to someone,” Geschwill said.

The Latino culture encourages deference to authority. This can make it difficult for well-intentioned employers to get workers to report grievances or make suggestions

Krautmann often uses his Spanish language skills to help break down cultural and communication barriers. He also enlists a veteran employee – his first hire, in fact, who’s been with the company 27 years – to help coun-



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sel and discipline employees. Years ago, when one worker was arriving three minutes late for morning calisthenics, it frustrated others and led some to consider whether they needed to arrive on time.

The veteran employee had a chat with him, and made it clear that tardiness would get him sent home without that full day's pay. That made the message clear that everyone plays by the same rules.

"When the standard is the same, then they all respect that standard," Krautmann said.

Policies help reduce risk

Uniform standards for discipline may seem far removed from concerns about sustainability. But some of the most important workplace safety mea-

sures are designed to protect both workers and employers.

One key resource is the utilization of an employee handbook, which lays down in writing what is expected of workers and the resources available to them.

"It makes it explicit what the rules of the game are," Krautmann said, "and as long as you enforce it uniformly, you have no issues."

For farm owners, documenting policies and procedures is important to reduce risk and liability, according to Matthew Buck, assistant director of Food Alliance.

"You can't necessarily keep accidents from happening," Buck said, "but having policies and procedures documented ... starts to reduce the risk of being an employer."

Documentation can be as simple as

passing around a sign-up sheet at training sessions, to make a record of who attended. Employers should keep a log of when sessions took place, including the subject matter and the names and qualifications of the trainers.

Heritage Seedlings plans to convert 20 acres into organic production in the coming years, and Krautmann is hopeful his employees can help him apply lessons learned over there to the rest of the business.

"Something we do in that 20 could lead us to say, 'Hey we can avoid spraying these dogwoods in this area because we had this experience in the organic area,'" Krautmann said. ☺

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