

## **Labor shortage a challenge for Essex County farmers**

By Kathy McCabe | July 15, 2007

Help is hard to find on Essex County farms. Not enough people know how to operate heavy farm equipment either. Packers and sales help at the farm stand are tough to find, too.

A lack of labor is one of the biggest issues facing farmers across the region, according to a recent survey conducted by Buy Local, a nonprofit organization that promotes agriculture in Essex County.

"It's one of the big reasons farmers are having a difficult time staying in business," said **Christine Rasmussen**, executive director of Buy Local. "It's also kept some farms from participating in farmer s markets, which are blooming all over. But a lot of North Shore farmers just don't have the help to staff them."

Buy Local sent the survey to 118 farms, including dairy, vegetable, and nursery operations on the North Shore and in Merrimack Valley. The survey had a 90 percent response rate, but not every farmer answered every question, Rasmussen said.

But labor was cited by 59 percent of the respondents as an issue. And 34 percent said that a lack of crop pickers, packers, and other help forced them to cut back on operations, such as traveling to farmer s markets.

"Picking melons in a hot field is back-breaking work," Rasmussen said. "A lack of help limits their ability to produce crops."

**Peter Gibney**, owner of Gibney Gardens in Danvers, said the labor shortage has gotten steadily worse.

"It's getting harder and harder to find help," he said. "Ten or fifteen years ago, I didn't have too many problems, because high school kids -- and even our kids and grandkids - - would help with the labor . . . But that doesn't happen anymore. Kids don't particularly like physical work."

Gibney now relies on day labor, including Cambodian immigrants, to pick crops. He pays them \$10 an hour. "They're good, dependable workers," he said.

Buy Local, funded by state grant money, plans to focus on the labor issue this harvest season. "We need to figure out how to connect farmers to the labor pool," Rasmussen said. "I think there are people interested in learning about the production of food."

Other issues cited in the survey are a loss of agricultural land. More farms have been forced to sell a portion of their land to stay afloat. Among the respondents, 14 percent reported selling a portion of their land over the last five years, with two reporting that they sold over 50 percent of the land, according to the survey.

Still, 90 percent of the respondents said they still plan to be around in five years. The spread of community-supported agriculture -- in which consumers buy shares of the farm production in spring and then collect food during the harvest -- is one area where farms are looking to grow, the survey noted.

Buy Local, which encourages consumers to shop at farmstands, has also produced a brochure listing local farms, with grant money from the regional tourist council, based in Peabody. Information is also available on its website, [buyfresh.org](http://buyfresh.org).

## **Hospital reaches pact with nurses**

A new three-year contract for union nurses at Salem Hospital includes a 13 percent wage increase, and new language to preserve retirement and healthcare benefits and prevent workplace violence.

Top-paid nurses will earn an average hourly wage of \$51.37 by the end of the contract. The raise will affect most of the 586 union members, since 60 percent of them now are at the top of the scale. Starting pay will be \$25.60 for new hires. Nurses assigned to a new "float pool," working wherever they're needed at the hospital, will be paid an additional \$4 per hour, the union said.

"This is a fair wage package," said **Joanne Raby**, cochair of the nurses' bargaining unit. "It will keep us competitive with other nurses on the North Shore."

Salem Hospital is part of North Shore Medical Center, owned by Partners Healthcare of Boston.

An official said the hospital is pleased with the new pact. "It enables us to offer competitive wages to our nurses, and will help us recruit and retain nurses in the future," **Valerie J. Hunt**, senior vice president of patient care services, said in a statement.

New language also requires management to negotiate changes in retirement or healthcare benefits. "Before, they could just change it at will, and we would have to take it," Raby said. "Now they'll have to sit down with us."

## **Billboards push renewable energy**

Billboards promoting renewable energy are due to go up tomorrow on Route 1 in Salisbury, Wyoma Square in Lynn, and on Route 1A north in Revere. In September, they'll greet visitors to the Topsfield Fairgrounds on Route 1 and at the intersection of Cabot and Rantoul streets in Beverly.

The campaign is sponsored by HealthLink, a Swampscott-based nonprofit group best known for advocating for tighter emission standards for power plants, including the Salem Harbor Station. Information about the campaign, as well as renewable energy efforts, is available on the group's website, [www.healthlink.org](http://www.healthlink.org).

## **Datebook**

Sandler Sales Institute on Friday will hold a free seminar on increasing sales and business development. The seminar is scheduled to run from 8 to 10 a.m. at the Cummings Center, Suite 207P on Elliott Street (Route 62) in Beverly. To register, call Joe Ippolito at 781-593-1775 or e-mail [jippolito@sandler.com](mailto:jippolito@sandler.com)

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