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# Training Needs Assessment of Farm Workers in Orange and Sullivan Counties, NY

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# Training Needs Assessment of Farm Workers in Orange and Sullivan Counties, NY

**Abstract**
[Excerpt] A team of three faculty members from Cornell interviewed people from agencies or organizations that provide services to or work with farm workers in and near Orange and Sullivan Counties NY. We also met many times with the staff of the Centro Independiente de Trabajadores Agricolas (CITA, Independent Farm Workers Center located in Florida, NY) and groups of farm workers. Most of the farm workers with whom we met work in the onion fields in the black dirt area of Orange County or on a large duck farm in Sullivan County. At the same time, we did a review of literature and basic analysis of census data and other government statistics, as well as consultation with industry expert and researchers.

**Keywords**
Orange County, Sullivan County, New York State, Centro Independiente de Trabajadores Agricolas, CITA, training, needs assessment, farms, farm workers

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# Training Needs Assessment of Farm Workers in Orange and Sullivan Counties, NY

June 20, 2001

By Cornell University, School of Industrial and Labor Relations

**For the Hudson/Catskill Workforce Development Center**

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# Training Needs Assessment of Farm Workers
in Orange and Sullivan Counties, NY

## Executive Summary

### What We Did

A team of three faculty members from Cornell interviewed people from agencies or organizations that provide services to or work with farm workers in and near Orange and Sullivan Counties NY. We also met many times with the staff of the Centro Independiente de Trabajadores Agricolas (CITA, Independent Farm Workers Center located in Florida, NY) and groups of farm workers. Most of the farm workers with whom we met work in the onion fields in the black dirt area of Orange County or on a large duck farm in Sullivan County. At the same time, we did a review of literature and basic analysis of census data and other government statistics, as well as consultation with industry expert and researchers.

**These steps allowed us to:**

- Determine the training needs of farm workers in the two counties. We first determined all the possible needs that could be met with training and then narrowed the list to the highest priority subjects that could be realistically provided soon.

- Determine the best method of delivery of training to farm workers whose long and irregular schedules and other factors make providing training a challenge.

- Provide a background of basic information about the workforce and the agriculture industry in and around Orange and Sullivan Counties. This information was to help us determine training needs of farm workers as well as provide information to people and agencies interested in the situation of farm workers in these two counties.

## What We Found

### Training needs

Farm workers have a large number of needs related to the long hours of difficult work they perform. We determined which of those needs could be addressed by training that might be funded by Workforce Development grants. We grouped those needed into the following categories:

- Safety and Health
- Citizenship/Community
- Skills
- Understanding the agriculture industry

### Issues affecting delivery of training

We found that delivery of training to farm workers has many unique challenges including:

- Long and irregular hours that leave little time for training
- Mostly Spanish speaking workforce
- Some workers have limited literacy skills in either English or Spanish
- Workers are spread out with limited access to transportation and communication
- The work in the onion fields is seasonal so workers are not present for much of the year

## Background of the Agriculture Industry

There are no consistent or reliable reports on the number of farm workers working in New York State. Agricultural Census data indicates that there over 2,000 farm workers in Orange County and at least 300 farm workers in Sullivan County.

The majority of the workers are Mexicans from the state of Puebla. There are also farm workers from Central America, Asia and the Caribbean working in Orange and Sullivan Counties. The largest numbers of farm workers in Orange County are on onion farms, which is seasonal. In Sullivan County the majority of farm workers also are from Puebla, Mexico and are employed on one large duck farm with two locations in Monticello. The majority of farm workers in the two counties speak Spanish as their first language and little or no English.

Orange County ranks 13th in the State for cash receipts from agriculture, generating over $ 80 million in 1999. Sullivan County generated $ 22.5 million in the same year. Leading agricultural products in Orange County include vegetables (mostly onions), dairy products, and nursery and greenhouse crops. Leading products in Sullivan County are poultry products, and dairy products.

Urbanization pressures are resulting in a significant decline in the number of farms and farmland in Orange and Sullivan Counties as it is in many other parts of New York State. Orange County had a 76 percent reduction in farmland from 1967 to 1997. Farmland in Sullivan County decreased by 36 percent since 1969. Various initiatives throughout the state, particularly at the town level, are being developed to preserve farmland by purchasing development rights with state funds.

Major trends affecting agriculture in New York State that might impact on farm workers include the following:

- Farms are becoming larger by consolidating, joining cooperatives or other collaborative marketing arrangements.
- Simultaneously, there is a proliferation of small specialty farms.
- As the role of large retail and supermarket chains grows, it is expected that there will be an increased emphasis on consistent quality and food safety in the farms.
- More direct marketing of farm products to supermarkets and consumers.
- There is more intense domestic and foreign competition in both the processed and fresh markets.

**What We Recommend:**

## Training for onion workers

We recommend an English as a second language class for farm workers from the onion farms to begin as soon as possible. The class could meet twice a week—Wednesday evenings and Sunday afternoons—until the end of the growing season in the fall.

This class needs a dedicated teacher who understands farm workers and the work they do. The class should focus on practical conversational English such as what to say in a store, useful words and phrases on the job, etc.

To provide a familiar and trusted location for the training we recommend holding classes at the CITA office or, if that is not possible, a local church. A grant for this training must also include transportation for the workers to the class and back.

If the English classes are successful, the next subjects to be provided, in this growing season or the next, would be information about the US immigration laws and instructions for obtaining income tax refunds.

## Training for the duck farm workers

For the duck farm workers, who work in Monticello throughout the year, we recommend health and safety training. This training should specifically address the hazards and conditions they face such as repetitive motion, duck excrement that causes slippery floors and respiratory issues as well as irregular split shifts that affect the bio- rhythms of the workers.

This training should be provided at each of the two large locations of the duck farm from 10:30 AM to 12:30 PM. Monday, Wednesday and Friday are the best days for one of the locations and Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday are best for the other location. While it is possible to conduct the training in the trailers where the workers live, a mobile classroom would be a much better learning environment.

# MAIN REPORT

## Introduction

While our main goal was to determine the training needs of farm workers in Orange and Sullivan counties, we knew that before that could be done we would have to better understand the industry in which farm workers are employed.

In this report we will present information on the state of the agriculture industry in New York State in general and in the two target counties in particular. This will include trends and information on the demographics of the workforce.

We worked closely with staff and members of CITA (Centro Independiente de Trabajadores Agricolas or Independent Farm Worker Center located in Florida, NY) the organization that represents farm workers in Orange and Sullivan Counties. With CITA's help we focused on the training needs of workers from onion farms of the Black Dirt Region of Orange County and of workers from a large duck farm in Sullivan County.

This report contains recommendations on the subjects in which farm workers need training and the method of delivery necessary to reach this unique group of workers.

## Goals

Cornell University, funded by a grant from the Hudson/Catskill Workforce Development Center, conducted a farm workers' training needs assessment in Orange and Sullivan Counties to accomplish the following:

- Determine the training needs of farm workers in the two counties and identify the highest priority subjects that could be realistically provided soon.
- Determine the best method of delivery of training to farm workers whose long and irregular schedules and other factors make providing training a challenge.
- Provide a background of basic information about the workforce and the agriculture industry in and around Orange and Sullivan Counties. This information was to help us determine training needs of farm workers as well as provide information to people and agencies interested in the situation of farm workers in these two counties.

## Methodology

In the early stages of the study two of the Cornell staff had extensive discussions with staff and sometimes members of CITA to get a general picture of the situation of farm workers, specific suggestions of training needs, and advice on how to gather information from and about farm workers. Based on those discussions the entire Cornell team met to determine how to accomplish the three goals.

From CITA we got a list of people and agencies that deal with farm workers. We divided the list and called everyone to conduct telephone interviews. In several cases these contacts referred us to additional contacts that we also called. The lists of people we interviewed and the questions we asked are attached.

Our interviews focused on three main areas: background on the industry and the workers, training needs of the workers and training delivery experiences and recommendations.

To minimize the cost of the study most interviews were done on the telephone. Typically they lasted 30-60 minutes although in some cases considerably more. In some cases we had several discussions with individuals. In others we emailed the questions in advance of the telephone discussion. In a small number of cases we met with people in person.

At the same time one of the members of the Cornell team compiled a profile of the agriculture industry in the two counties and the rest of New York State. This research was done largely by review of literature and basic analysis of census data and other government statistics, as well as consultation with industry expert and researchers.

After all the interviews were conducted we compiled a list of all the possible needs. We removed topics that are not appropriate topics for Workforce Development funds. We further narrowed the list to topics we felt could most practically be provided quickly.

We met with two separate groups of farm workers—those who work in the onion fields in Orange County and those who work on a large duck farm in Sullivan County—to get their priorities among the potential training topics. The meetings with the duck workers were held on the farm, while the meetings with onion workers were held at CITA's office located near the onion fields. All our discussions with the farm workers were conducted in Spanish.

# Overview of the New York Agricultural Industry

This report reviews the main trends currently affecting New York agriculture and examines the situation of some of the crops that are key to the industry in Hudson Valley counties such as Orange County, and other counties in Southern New York like Sullivan County.

New York agriculture generated over $ 3 billion in cash receipts in 1999, employing approximately 61 thousand farm workers. New York's competitive advantage is in the proximity to the New York City market and the lateness of its season, which results into higher prices for New York crops particularly when other regions get bad harvests. The main product groups are dairy and other livestock products, nurseries, fruit, and vegetable production. Dairy products alone account for 56.1 percent of the state's agricultural revenues, making New York the 3rd largest producer in the country. The second largest category is vegetables representing over 9 percent of the State's farm cash receipts. The leading non-dairy products are nursery and greenhouse and apples accounting for about 9 percent and 4 percent of agricultural revenues respectively. New York ranks second in the nation among apple producers, behind Washington.

The top three agricultural counties in terms of cash receipts are Suffolk with 5.3 percent of the State's total cash receipts, Wyoming with 4.9 percent, and Genessee with 4.1 percent. (Table 1) Seventy five percent of Suffolk's agricultural sales came from nursery and greenhouse crops. Wyoming (Western New York) produces mostly dairy products, which account for 82 percent of the county's cash receipt. Genessee (Western NY) produces mostly dairy products and vegetable crops.

Table 1

**Top Agricultural Counties**

Cash Receipts in 1,000 dollars, 1999

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Suffolk | $ 162,885 |
| 2 | Wyoming | $ 153,186 |
| 3 | Genesee | $ 127,993 |
| 4 | Cayuga | $ 125,379 |
| 5 | Wayne | $ 112,663 |
| 6 | St. Lawrence | $ 100,933 |
| 7 | Chautauqua | $ 100,826 |
| 8 | Washington | $ 86,169 |
| 9 | Jefferson | $ 86,064 |
| 10 | Ontario | $ 85,590 |
| | State total | $ 3,095,219 |

Source: NY Agricultural Statistics

## ORANGE AND SULLIVAN COUNTIES

There are approximately 740 farms in Orange County generating total sales of over $80 million. This county ranks 13th in the state for cash receipts from agriculture. The leading products are vegetables (mostly onions) accounting for 30 percent of the county's agricultural revenues, dairy products accounting for 29 percent, and nursery and greenhouse accounting for 22 percent. The value of agricultural products sold from Sullivan County was $22.5 million in 1999. Sullivan County has 370 farms and the leading products are poultry products (39 % of total sales) and dairy products (36 %).

Farming in general has been in decline in Orange County. The number of onion farms decreased from 181 in 1978 to 65. The land where onions are grown is protected by the state from development, but many onion farms have gone out of business. One major factor influencing the farming decline in Orange County is the increasing population resulting from sub-urbanization. In Warwick alone, population increased tenfold from 3,000 to 30,000 over the last ten years; and 740 new single-family houses were built during the same period. In November 2000, the Town of Warwick approved a proposal to use $9.5 million of tax revenues to protect land from development.[1] Similar initiatives are being developed throughout the state to protect farmland. The population in Sullivan County has remained constant over the last ten years, but farms and farmland have been in decline since the 1960's.

## FARM WORKERS

There are no consistent reports on the number of farm workers working in New York State. The numbers differ from agency to agency depending on the method used to compile data and on who is included or excluded. A 1997 census developed by the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) reports about 61,000 farm workers in the state. It is estimated that seasonal workers represent about two thirds of the state's farm workforce. There are around 2,300 temporary workers under the federal H-2A program, according to data from the Department of Labor. Workers under the H-2A program are employed in farms producing apples, nursery and greenhouse crops, cabbage, and cranberry.[2]

Until the early 1980's, most farm workers were African Americans from the southern United States who came to New York for the harvest season. Currently, the majority of the farm workers are of Mexican nationality, and only a small group of African American

[1] New York Times. April 15, 2001.
[2] Congressional Research Service. Report for Congress, Immigration of Agricultural Guest Workers: Policy, Trades, and Legislative Issues. February 15, 2001.

workers come from Florida every year. Most Mexican farm workers come from the Puebla and Oaxaca regions in Mexico. In Orange and Sullivan Counties, workers of Mexican nationality are mostly from Puebla. Workers of other nationalities include workers from Central American countries (Honduras, Guatemala, Costa Rica), the Caribbean (Jamaica, Puerto Rico), and a small group from Asian countries (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh). H-2A workers are predominantly from Jamaica. The majority of the farm workers are in the age range of 18 to 40. In terms of gender and marital status, single men constitute the largest group. The farm worker population in Orange and Sullivan counties tends to include more families.

Average incomes of farm workers are below the federal poverty level of $ 17,463 for a family of four (with two children). The median income of a farm worker was between $5,000 and $7,500 in 1999.[3] Farm workers in New York State live under severe conditions including an extreme shortage of affordable and safe housing. Approved housing is available for about 7,000 workers in the entire State.[4]

The top three counties, in terms of farm worker employment, are Wayne, Suffolk, and Chautaqua. (Table 2) Orange County ranks 7th with 2,009 farm workers. Sullivan County employs approximately 300 farm workers. There are no reliable statistics on farm worker employment by agricultural product or sector. Existing research estimates 25,000 migrant and seasonal workers could be employed in harvest chores in fruit and vegetable farms.

**Table 2**

**Top 10 Counties in Terms of Farm Worker Employment**

| Rank | County | Farm Workers |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Wayne | 4,771 |
| 2 | Suffolk | 4,606 |
| 3 | Chautauqua | 3,063 |
| 4 | Orleans | 2,424 |
| 5 | Erie | 2,013 |
| 6 | Steuben | 2,015 |
| 7 | Orange | 2,009 |
| 8 | Ulster | 1,706 |
| 9 | Cayuga | 1,634 |
| 10 | St. Lawrence | 1,624 |

Source: 1997 Census of Agriculture, USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service.

[3] Income and Poverty, US Department of Labor.
[4] Rural Opportunities, Inc., Farm worker Housing in New York State. October 2000.

## INDUSTRY STRUCTURE

The New York food industry involves the farmers (growers/producers), their suppliers of inputs, marketing operations for fresh produce, processing firms, and food service firms. This section of the report focuses on the production (farm) sector of the industry.

There are approximately 39,000 farms using 7.8 million acres in the state (about 25 percent of NY's total land area). While the number of farms has stayed within a range of 38 to 39 thousand for the last 11 years, farmland decreased from 8.4 million acres in 1989 to 7.8 in 1996 and remained constant since then. From 1989 to 1999, New York lost 600,000 acres of farmland compared to 1 million acres lost between 1980 and 1989. Top counties in terms of acres of farmland are St. Lawrence, Steuben, and Jefferson.

Farm cash receipts increased at a slow rate of less than one percent per year from 2.8 billion in 1990 to about 3.1 billion in 1999. Net farm income in 1999 was 658 million, 8 percent higher than the 1990 level of 610 million. Most farms are individual or family owned (84.6%), and 65 percent of the farms are less than 180 acres in size.

In terms of sales, 3.1 percent of the farms receive 42.7 percent of all agricultural cash receipts.[5] According to the NYS Agricultural Statistics Service, only 22 percent of all farms had sales of $100,000 or more, but they operated 49 percent of the land in 1999. The number of farms with sales of less than $ 40,000 has been decreasing for over 30 years in the state. In terms of farm size, the structure of the industry also has been changing. The number of operations of 1,000 acres and more has increased, while number of farms in the medium and small size ranges decreased. These changes are consistent with the national trend for larger scale producers. Said trend is favored by the concentration taking place in food distribution. A major grower cooperative in the state is Agrilink, which has recently acquired large out of state operations such as Dean Foods and Agripac.

A recent trend has been the proliferation of small specialty farms. From 1998 to 1999, 1,000 new small farms entered the industry. The current farming structure in New York State reflects the national trend of large-scale operations co-existing with small specialty farms.

[5] 1997 Census of Agriculture, USDA.

## TRENDS IN NYS AGRICULTURE

- Consolidation in processing and retailing markets: the role of large retail chains such as Wal-Mart and K-Mart is increasing, and supermarket chains are consolidating. A consequence of this consolidation is more direct marketing from growers to chains, as the latter prefer to buy directly from growers. According to industry observers, another possible impact of consolidation and large chains could be an increased emphasis on food safety and consistently high quality, the development of stable relationships with growers, possibly leading to contract relationships (as with processors).

- More direct marketing and diminished role of brokers/intermediaries: direct marketing includes farm stands, u-picks, local farm markets, urban farm markets, mail order and email commerce. The role of terminal markets such as Hunts Point is in decline, and they mostly supply to food service firms and "Mom and Pop's." Food service is becoming more important as well (and is also concentrated).

- Consolidation in production, which is mostly driven by consolidation in retailing and processing: Individual growers are becoming bigger; some are joining cooperatives or other collaborative packing and marketing arrangements.[6] This consolidation in production responds to diminished market power of individual growers (when dealing with large chains) and diminished cost competitiveness as production and particularly packing costs increase as a consequence of requirements imposed by the retail chains.

- Specialty farms and Local Markets: farmers that do not increase their scale are developing market "niches" by growing specialty crops, diversifying, or by marketing in a special location (directly to consumers). Medium and small farms that have found no special angle are facing difficulties staying in business.

- Increasing international and inter-state competition, including China apple juice concentrate (selling at 90% of US cost), New Zealand dairy, frozen broccoli from California and Mexico.

- The Fruit and vegetable sector in the Mid-Hudson valley region has been declining in number of farms and acreage at a faster rate than in other areas of the state.[7]

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[6] CITA Research, by Carolyn Mow. 1999

[7] ARME, Cornell University. The Feasibility of Mid-Hudson Valley Wholesale Fresh Product Facility. August 1996.

## OVERVIEW OF SELECTED CROPS

# Fruit

The leading fruit crop in New York is apples accounting for 62 percent of 1999 value of all major fruit crops. Grapes are the second largest fruit crop accounting for 26 percent. Forty eight percent of New York apples are sold for fresh use (or stored) and 52 percent are sold for processing.[8] The trend is for a shift from processing to fresh, mainly because of declining prices of processing varieties resulting from the emergence of China as a major producer of apples and apple juice concentrate (AJC). Industry experts predict new plantings in New York State will not be processing varieties.

Another factor influencing the shift from processing apple production to fresh apples is the consolidation taking place among major processors. The current trend is for fewer, more streamlined processors buying New York fruit in general. Experts believe that this factor brings more uncertainty to growing apples for processing. In their view, as processing operations such as Duffy Mott are being acquired by multinationals like Cadbury-Schweppes, there is a higher likelihood that such large corporations may decide to discontinue processing altogether.[9]

The top producing counties are Wayne (Western NY) with over 21 thousand acres in apple orchards, Ulster (Hudson Valley) with over 8 thousand acres, and Orleans and Niagara (both in Western NY) holding about 12 thousand acres together. Production of processing varieties takes place primarily in the Western counties, but most growers in those counties produce for both processing and fresh markets. Production in the Hudson Valley is mostly for the fresh market.

Generally there has been a decline in number of farms and acreage for apple production in New York. Experts foresee that such decline will continue, particularly in the Hudson Valley, where wholesale marketing is more fragmented with many small packers and antiquated packing lines. Consolidations of packing/shipping operations to get economies of scale are key to survival. Small packing sheds are no longer competitive and more farmers are selling through larger distributors. Some growers in the Hudson Valley area have started to consolidate, but consolidation in packing/shipping is more predominant in Western New York. Experts foresee that

[8] New York Agricultural Statistics Service. 1999.
[9] Gerald White, Outlook New York, Farm Progress. January 1999; and CITA Research by Carolyn Mow. 1999.

production in Western New York counties will increase, but may decrease in the Hudson Valley.[10]

New York apple growers have been experiencing more intense competition in both domestic and foreign markets. The collapse of the Asian markets for Washington State's fresh apple exports resulted in more Washington apples being marketed in the U.S. and in foreign markets where the New York apple is traditionally sold.

Overall, industry experts agree that the outlook for apple growers is not good, unless they become larger in scale or specialize in local markets by selling directly to consumers. Costs of production will continue to increase, particularly because of new packing/shipping technologies required by large supermarket chains, forcing smaller operations out of the industry.

## Vegetables

As indicated by industry experts, vegetable operations are becoming larger in size and more efficient in production.[11] Census data shows that the number of farms decreased while vegetable production value and acreage increased from 1987 to 1997 (latest data available for these items). Experts also predict that more producers will consider adopting alternative production systems such as organic, sustainable, and greenhouse; as well as new marketing systems such as direct marketing, slotting fee, e-commerce. In the face of continuing consolidation in the retail and food service industries, foreign and domestic competition and higher production costs, producers will need to become more reliable suppliers, more diversified and customer oriented, offering customer-tailored products and services. Value added is key for making profits in the industry, and can be developed in the processing or selection methods, packaging, or communication systems.[12]

The top vegetable producing counties are Genesee, Orange, Orleans, Monroe and Suffolk. (Table 3) The value of vegetable production increased in Genesee since 1996, while it decreased in Orange. The three main fresh market vegetables in the state are cabbage, onions and sweet corn. Sweet corn for both fresh market and processing had the largest growth trend from 1987 to 1997. Both cabbage and onions had negative growth trends for the same period.

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[10] Gerald White, The Future of the Northeast Fruit Industry, ARME, Cornell University, June 1996.
[11] ARME, Cornell University, New York Economic Handbook 2000.
[12] Ibid.

**Table 3**

**Top Ten Vegetable Producing Counties**

1999

| Rank | | 1,000 dollars | % of State Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Genesee | $ 46,499 | 16.4% |
| 2 | Orange | $ 29,072 | 10.2% |
| 3 | Orleans | $ 28,076 | 9.9% |
| 4 | Monroe | $ 18,157 | 6.4% |
| 5 | Suffolk | $ 17,890 | 6.3% |
| 6 | Ontario | $ 16,565 | 5.8% |
| 7 | Oswego | $ 15,702 | 5.5% |
| 8 | Cayuga | $ 13,011 | 4.6% |
| 9 | Niagara | $ 12,454 | 4.4% |
| 10 | Wayne | $ 9,607 | 3.4% |
| | All other Counties | $ 76,897 | 27.1% |
| | **State total** | **$ 283,930** | **100.0%** |

Source: NYS Agricultural Statistics

Onions represented 14.7 percent of farms receipts from vegetables in 1999. New York ranks sixth in onion production in the country. There are about 130 onion farmers in New York State, 60 percent of them in the Pine Island area. They are getting bigger or going out of business.[13] With respect to production areas, onion production and acreage have been decreasing in Orange County, while they have been increasing in the Orleans-Genesee area. The Oswego area is the third largest in terms of acreage, but second largest in terms of production, and it has also been increasing onion production and adding acreage. Orange County is no longer the largest producer in terms of volume, but still holds the largest acreage. Yield per acre has been in decline for the last 3 years in this county.

## Nursery and Greenhouse

Nursery and greenhouse is a growing sector in New York agriculture and throughout the country. The number of farms in New York almost tripled from 1,795 in 1987 to 3,346 in 1997. Total grower revenues increased at about the same rate, from 168.2 million in 1987 to 290.7 in 1997. According to industry analysts, this sector's growth is

[13] CITA Research by Carolyn Mow. 1999.

related to the economic expansion of the last decade. New York ranked eighth in production of nursery and greenhouse crops in the country.

As in other sectors, experts find that superstores and warehouse stores are increasingly playing an important role in sales and "will continue to seize more retail dollar shares." They also find that consolidation is taking place at all levels, including producers, wholesalers, and retailers.[14] As New York producers are likely to become larger, experts believe medium and small sized marketers will have to "adopt innovative marketing technique, form alliances, and adapt to the new electronic technology."

Top producer counties include Suffolk with 43 percent of 1997 total sales, Erie with 6.4, and Orange with over 5 percent. Volume and sales increased in all these counties and in most other areas.

[14] ARME, Cornell University. New York Economic Handbook 2000.

# Findings

## Results of Interviews with People from Farm Worker Advocacy Agencies

The people we interviewed from farm worker advocacy agencies made a wide range of suggested training topics. They also advised us on delivery of training.

Predictably, people from each agency tended to make suggestions based on their own area of expertise. People from the clinics tended to recommend training on health issues, those from legal and advocacy organizations tended to propose training on rights and how to organize. A chart with a compilation of their ideas for training appears on the next page.

Some of the topics on the list were outside the scope of Workforce Development funds so when we met with the farm workers for the final prioritization of training needs, those were not discussed.

We also heard many recommendations on the delivery of training. Several of the people we interviewed had some experience conducting training for farm workers. Overwhelmingly, we heard about the difficulty of finding time for training because of the workers extremely long hours of work. Equally common were comments about the obstacles caused by the geographic separation of the workers and the lack of transportation.

No one had found a totally satisfying solution to these problems. Most of the people we interviewed agreed that the training would have to be brought to the workers on the farms or transportation to and from classes would have to be provided.

One of the clinics trained a number of workers about how to recognize symptoms of certain diseases and when to seek care. These workers were then asked to be a resource to their co-workers. The person we interviewed from this clinic said this approach was somewhat successful and felt it was worthy of our consideration.

Universally, we heard that training must be delivered in Spanish by instructors who understand the hard work and severe conditions experienced by farm workers. Because the workers are tired and training must take place after work or during breaks, we were advised to keep classes relatively short, clearly useful and to serve food at classes if possible.

## Summary of Training Topics Suggested by People Interviewed from Farm Worker Advocacy Agencies

| HEALTH ISSUES ON THE JOB | HEALTH ISSUES OFF THE JOB | WORKER RIGHTS & STATUS |
|---|---|---|
| • Right to portable toilets and potable drinking water in the fields<br>• Dealing with hazards/dangers that are unique to farm work such as use of ladders, tractors, and other equipment<br>• How to prevent dehydration, heat exhaustion, skin cancer, hypothermia<br>• First aid and CPR<br>• Pesticides and pesticide related safety<br>• OSHA regulations<br>• Models of other efforts to change things (work schedules, ergonomics)<br>• Ticks-Lyme disease | • Prevention and treatment of diseases common to farm workers (i.e., heart disease and diabetes)<br>• First aid and CPR<br>• HIV prevention<br>• Domestic violence prevention<br>• Dental hygiene<br>• Overall hygiene<br>• Mental health, depression, anxiety<br>• Available services (i.e., pregnant women and Medicaid, kids can use children's health and food stamps) | • Legal rights<br>• Workers Compensation law<br>• Rights in U.S. even if undocumented<br>• Immigration law and issues<br>• Competent legal aid |
| **THE COMMUNITY** | **SELF-ORGANIZATION** | **NEEDS WHILE HERE** |
| • How the school system works<br>• Drop-out prevention for families with school-age children<br>• How "things happen" in the community<br>• How to get tax refunds | • Organizing<br>• How to think more broadly, how to achieve things at a greater scale<br>• How to stay in touch with workers when they leave the area<br>• Democracy/citizenship | • Availability of social services<br>• Housing<br>• Literacy<br>• ESL<br>• Alternative communication and transportation links—what have other groups done to enable workers to get together more easily |

## Onion Workers-Needs

Among the onion workers the overwhelming priority was for ESL classes geared to their needs. These would be classes in conversational English focusing on practical needs such as buying things in a store, ordering in a restaurant, responding to police, and discussing their work with their English speaking employers.

Since their work is seasonal and most of the onion workers will leave New York when the onion season ends, they are eager to start classes as soon as possible. Despite a very long and hard work schedule the workers proposed two classes per week. Although Sunday is the only day they have for personal business, recreation and relaxation, they are willing to take classes on Sunday afternoon. For their second day of classes the workers proposed Wednesday after their workday approximately 7:30 PM.

Based on our survey their would be at least 15 workers ready to take the first class in English as a second language. This number could grow or shrink depending on the popularity of the instructor(s) and the classes, the usefulness of the training, and the farm work schedules of the participants.

Almost as important to the onion workers as ESL training were classes about the U.S. immigration laws and workshops on obtaining income tax refunds. The workers want to understand the immigration laws and their rights, as well as learn how to gain work or citizenship status. The onion workers are also aware that while they pay more taxes than they believe they actually owe, they do not know how to obtain refunds.
Since their time for training is so limited, the workers understand that training on immigration law and tax refunds will probably not start this growing season.

## Onion Workers—Delivery of Training

The onion workers work six days a week from sun up to nearly sun down. They mostly live on the farms surrounding Florida NY. There is no reliable transportation for them between the farms and the town.

When CITA has held meetings or conducted training in the past it has been held in their office and CITA staff use a van to pick up the workers and bring them to the office. At the end of the training the van must take the workers back to their farms.

On Sunday when the workers are off, they must attend to all their personal business, like buying groceries, washing clothes, etc. Despite the premium the workers put on this time they have proposed holding classes on Sunday afternoons from 4:30 PM to 6:30 PM. In addition, they want classes on Wednesday evenings after work. Since farm work does not end precisely at a particular time every day and the workers need time to wash up, classes could start at approximately 7:30 pm and last for about 1½ hours. Since this is also the time the workers would eat dinner it is necessary that food be provided at the classes.

## Onion Workers—Recommendations

We recommend that as soon as possible an English as a second language class be started for the onion workers.

The classes should meet on Sunday's from 4:30 PM to 6:30 PM and Wednesday evenings from 7:30 PM to 9:00 PM.

Classes will be at the CITA office in Florida, N.Y. The workers would be picked up at their farms, brought to class and returned to their farms after the class.

Food should be provided at both classes, but especially the Wednesday evening classes that take place during the workers dinnertime.

The class will teach very practical conversational English.

The instructor(s) need to understanding and supportive of the workers.

Initially, we recommend that classes have approximately 15-20 workers. Once the instructor(s) have made an assessment of the language skills and needs of the workers, additional and/or smaller classes may be needed.

## Duck Farm Workers-Needs

Safety and health training was the highest priority of the duck workers. They are concerned about the health implications of their working conditions and want more information on potential dangers and how to avoid them.

The duck farm, at which the workers are employed, produces ducks primarily for their livers that are made into foie gras. This requires that the ducks be force-fed to produce large livers. The majority of the workers on the farm are employed as feeders. Others care for the newly hatched ducklings, slaughter and butcher the ducks and perform other tasks.

The feeders are each assigned approximately 350 ducks to force-feed with a machine for a 30-day period. The feeding schedule for the first two weeks consists of successive cycles of 3 hours feeding followed by a 3-hour break. There is a slight variation to the feeding schedule during the second two weeks. These cycles are repeated non-stop, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for the entire 30-day period. Typically, the feeders receive a new batch of ducks immediately after turning in the ducks that are ready for slaughter. This is a year round operation. The schedule is designed for maximum production and its consequences for the workers include severe disruption of sleep patterns and other bio-rhythms and the negation of a balanced family and community life.

The ducks are kept in huge warehouse-like buildings. The duck excrement is omni-present, creating a slippery floor that causes falls, producing a constant foul odor and respiratory complains and getting on the clothes and hands of the workers. Little, if any, safety equipment like masks is provided to the workers. In addition, because the workers live in company-owned trailers located yards from the feeding buildings, they are constantly exposed to the odor from the duck excrement.

The workers understandably want to eliminate the obvious hazards and learn about the potential health effects of their working conditions. They are hoping that safety and health classes will help them identify dangers and their causes as well as providing models for correcting unsafe and unhealthy workplaces.

Like the onion workers the second and third training priorities for the duck farm workers are immigration laws and tax refunds.

## Duck Farm Workers-Delivery of Training

The duck farm at which we assessed the training needs of workers has two large locations approximately 8 miles apart. The majority of the workers live in trailers located on the farms. Some workers live in apartments in nearby towns and commute to work.

The workers want the training to be held separately at each of the two locations between the morning and afternoon feedings from 10:30 AM to 12:30 PM. The best days for one location are Monday, Wednesday, and Friday and at the other, Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday.

There is room in some of the trailers where the workers live for small classes, but these locations are not ideal. A better alternative would be a mobile classroom. We have determined that such vehicles exist, but have not located a vendor who can rent them on an as needed basis. The New York Bus Service provides mobile classrooms to the NYC Board of Education for $600 per day, which includes a driver. More investigation needs to be done to explore the possibility of a classroom on wheels.

## Duck Farm Workers—Recommendations

There should be one class each on the following topics:

- General approach to identifying workplace hazards and for correcting unsafe and unhealthy conditions
- Preventing injury from repetitive motions
- Preventing falls
- Identifying and dealing with the health effects of duck excrement

All the safety and health training for the duck workers must be presented in Spanish.

The instructor(s) should also have an understanding of the nature of agricultural work and the specific conditions of the duck workers.

The classes should not only provide information, but also equip the workers to address their health and safety needs themselves.

Initially, there should be one class at each location that meets once a week for four weeks.

After these initial classes the instructors and the workers will assess the continuing needs.

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## People Interviewed For the Needs Assessment:

- Aspacio Alcantara, CITA staff, Florida NY.
- Guila Earle-Richardson, Director, NYCAM, Cooperstown, NY.
- Marilyn Edid, Extension Associate, NYSSILR, Cornell University.
- Kay Embrey, Cornell Migrant Program, Sodus Point, NY.
- Margaret Gutierrez, Migrant Education, New Paltz, NY.
- Glen Holt, New State Department of Labor, Orange County office.
- Patrick Lieb, staff, Alamo Health Clinic, Goshen, NY.
- Carolyn Mow, former CITA staff.
- James O'Barr, Director Hudson Valley Migrant Health, Peekskill, NY.
- AdanJesus Quavez ,CITA staff, Florida NY.
- Adrian Ramirez, CITA staff, Florida NY.
- Charlotte Sibley, Farm worker Law Project, New Paltz, NY.
- Dan Werner, Farm worker Legal Services, New Paltz, NY.
- Gerald White, Professor, Department of Agricultural, Resource, and Managerial Economics, Cornell University, Ithaca.
- Vera Wisniewski, Nurse, New Paltz Clinic.
- Rev. Richard Witt, Director, Rural and Migrant Ministry, Poughkeepsie.

## Questions for NYS Farm Worker Advocacy Agencies

1- What geographical area do you service? How many farm workers do you provide services to?

2- Approximately how many farm workers work in the area you service? Where do they come from?

3- Do you provide services to farm workers who work year-round, seasonally or both?

4- What are the major crops or agricultural sector in your area?

5- Do you provide any type of training? In what areas? How effective has the training been? Why?

6- What needs do you see that farm workers have, that might be addressed with training?

7- What needs do you see that might be addressed other ways?

8- What type of health and safety training would be needed?

9- What other agencies or institutions provide services to farm workers in your area? (including clergy and government agencies).

10- Do you know of any sources for data on farm workers, the agriculture industry or industry trends?

# Bios of Cornell Staff Working on the Needs Assessment

## Jessica Govea Thorbourne

Jessica Govea Thorbourne is Director of Labor In-House Programs at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Extension Division. Her areas of expertise include: strategic planning, organizational development, staff and leadership development, curriculum design, and organizing.

Ms. Govea Thorbourne, who has been a professional organizer for 36 years, was part of the group of organizers that founded the United Farm Workers Union. She served in many capacities in Canada, Mexico and the U.S. during her 16-year tenure with the UFW, including Director of Organizing and elected member of the national executive board.

Other organizations Jessica has worked with include SEIU, ACTWU and the National AFL-CIO. In 1993, she worked with the leadership of the coffee processors union in El Salvador to develop and implement a successful re-organizing plan after that country's civil war. She has also done extensive work with the Spanish speaking new immigrant communities throughout the country.

Before coming to Cornell, she was an assistant professor at the School of Management and Labor Relations at Rutgers University in New Jersey where she also was Director of the Union Leadership Academy.

Jessica's first language is Spanish. She became a farm worker at the age of four in the cotton fields of California.

## Maria Figueroa

Maria Figueroa is Director of Labor and Industry Research at the Cornell University-School of Industrial and Labor Relations. Prior to joining Cornell-ILR she was as an Organizing Research Specialist at the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees, and a Senior Research Analyst with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. Her primary area of work has been research for organizing, industry analysis for union strategic planning, and corporate research. While with the Teamsters Union, Maria worked in a training needs assessment project for food processing workers in California and Washington State.

Maria's country of origin is Paraguay, where she started doing research for labor unions and small farmer (campesino) organizations in 1979. From 1983 to 1986, she worked as a researcher at the United Nations' Center for Studies on Transnational Corporations.

Maria completed requirements for an M.A. in Political Economy and was accepted for continued study into the Ph.D. program at the New School for Social Research in New York City. She taught classes at New York University, the Harry Van Arsdale School of Labor, and Cornell ILR's Trade Union Women Program.

## Ken Margolies

Ken Margolies specializes in labor education at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Extension Division. He has organized conferences, designed training, trained trainers and taught classes in a variety of work related topics, including diversity, immigration, time/work management, organizing, and team building.

Prior to working for Cornell Ken worked as Senior Field Representative of SEIU Local 715, National Bargaining and Research Representative for the Association of Flight Attendants, Organizing Director of the Communications Workers of America and Education Director of the Teamsters Union.

In 1993 he spent 7 weeks in Mexico living with a family, learning Spanish and visiting with Mexican trade unionists. In 1999 he went on a two-week Labor Union Health Care tour and cultural exchange in Cuba.

Ken serves on the Board of Directors of the Hudson/Catskill Workforce Development Center, the Westchester County Advisory Board of the Mt. Sinai Occupational Health Clinic, and the Board of the Connie Hogarth Center for Social Change at Manhattanville College.

He has a BS degree from Cornell University in Industrial and Labor Relations and a MS degree from the University of the District of Columbia in Labor Studies. He taught classes at San Jose City College and Stanford University.

## Cornell Staff Hours for
## Farm Worker Training Needs Assessment

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|---|---|
| **Interviews** | **36 hours** |
| **Research, writing, preparation** | **89 hours** |
| **Meetings with CITA staff and/or farm workers** | **47 hours** |
| **Meetings of Cornell staff** | **14 hours** |
| **TOTAL HOURS:** | **186 hours = 26.5 days (7 hours = 1 day)** |
| Cornell fee $1,000. per day x **26.5 days =$26,500.** | |