

TOWARDS SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN CALIFORNIA AGRICULTURE: THE ROLE OF MARKET-BASED INITIATIVES

Ron Stochlic, Academic Coordinator, UC ANR Nutrition Policy Institute

Christy Getz, UC Cooperative Extension Specialist, UC Berkeley



“Here they look for ways to resolve problems. At other farms they punished us for speaking up and gave us harder work as a form of retaliation. Workers would get upset and quit. Here it’s not like that. Here they look for solutions.”
- Worker on EFI-certified farm

Introduction

California’s approximately one million agricultural workers and accompanying family members often face difficult working and living conditions, including low wages; seasonal unemployment; occupational safety and health challenges; disrespectful treatment; discrimination and sexual harassment.

Efforts to improve working conditions for agricultural workers have included unionization; regulation/enforcement; and consumer boycotts.

Recent years have witnessed growing consumer interest in a more socially sustainable food system and the rise of market-based efforts responding to that demand. These voluntary labelling and certification schemes seek to improve farm labor conditions via standards with which growers and other stakeholders along the supply chain must comply.

Aims

- Better understand the costs & benefits associated with improved labor conditions for agricultural workers.
- Develop a set of indicators to measure costs and benefits of improved labor conditions for growers, in areas including retention, productivity, product quality and access to a stable labor force.
- Conduct case study research on farms and other agricultural operations certified by the Equitable Food Initiative (EFI), a new market-based initiative with fair labor standards.
- Evaluate the process and impacts of EFI certification in general, and in particular the Leadership Teams model, an innovative labor-management approach promoting improved collaboration, communication, worker understanding of the EFI standards, and worker monitoring of compliance with the standards.

Results

Growers report high levels of satisfaction

- Improved two-way communications
- Growers are able to address worker concerns → improved worker morale and satisfaction
- Reduced conflict
- Growers would maintain Leadership Teams model even if not required by EFI

Workers report high levels of satisfaction

- Ability to advocate for improved conditions without fear of retaliation
- Greater transparency and awareness about farm management decisions
- Improved communications and reduced conflict
- More respectful treatment; culture of care
- Women, indigenous workers report reduced harassment and discrimination

Challenges

- Ensuring more than superficial understanding of specific EFI labor standards
- Ensuring that leadership roles are constructive and not abused
- Ensuring adequate representation and participation of women, indigenous workers and contract workers on Leadership Teams
- Overcoming steep learning curve to successful implementation

Methods

- Site visits to four EFI-certified farms (2 in California, 2 in Baja California Norte, Mexico).
- Individual and group interviews with growers and farm managers; Leadership Team members; farmworkers not on the Leadership Teams.
- Observations of Leadership Team meetings.
- Interviews with EFI staff.
- Interviews with representatives of EFI-certified companies

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