

NESAWG 2015 *It Takes A Region* Conference

Session: Farm Worker and Farmer Realities

Presenters: Lazaro Alvarez Andrade, Peter Ten Eyck, Sue Futrell

Background given by Liz Henderson

- Liz Henderson – organic farmer since 1980; “choice to leave academia was the best thing I ever did”
- Michael Rozyne, Sue Futrell, and Liz Henderson were the creators of the workshop
- Current food system coupled with free trade makes it hard to keep family farms afloat
- 7 million farms in 1943 to 2.1 million farms today
- Brings the following questions: What do rising costs, global warming, floods, droughts, low prices have to do with farmers? How are these farmers really being affected?
- As farm commodity prices fall again, more farms are going under. Farm incomes at the end of August 2015 were predicted to drop to less than half the peak two years. Compared to 2014, milk prices have dropped \$10 per 100 lbs of milk that farms are selling.
- How are we going to get to the situation we’re in now to the really “rosy” picture given in the Food Solutions guide? And more importantly what does that mean for people and who is going to do it?
- Previously depended on migrant labor

Peter Ten Eyck: Indian Ladder Farm: apple orchard storage and cider mill outside of Albany

Antonio & Victor: farmworkers

Lazaro Alvarez Andrade: from Mexico City, came to USA 3 years ago, has a Bachelors degree in business administration, worked in a pharmaceutical company before coming here

Carly Fox: works for Worker Justice Center of New York

Sue Futrell: Red Tomato – not for profit broker for fruits and vegetables that has a mission of getting fair prices for local farms

Pete Ten Eyck:

- Owns four-generation farm in Albany County; apples, blueberries, raspberries (formerly farm had both dairy and fruit)
- Graduated from CALS; realized he didn’t want to grow anything that moved “because why would you do that”
- Trying to be efficient – responsibility of people to see that sustainable cuisine exists, not just sustainable agriculture
- Can’t compete with Wal Mart – the Disney World of produce – “you can have anything that grows anywhere in the world 365 days a year at a low price – it’s convenient”
- “All fall I get to talk to people who eat food and talk about what they want and don’t want”
- Not organic grower
- A member of Eco Apple – program by Red Tomato – kinder, gentler way to grow things
- Biggest problem is Apple Scab – have to spray fungicides in order to keep that under control; spraying nitrogen on the leaves just before they fall on the ground so that they rot and the apple scab cannot transfer back to the tree

-“It’s a mental and physical game”

-People from Jamaica come up to work, and then workers from the farm go to Jamaica to work in the winter

-Several steps to bringing in H2A workers – required wage for H2A workers is \$11.26/hr

-Local infrastructure is ~\$100/week

-2012 – had 9% of a crop and lost hundreds of thousands of dollars

-Explains the “factory” of apple making

“At the point where I need to step down, children who have jobs that pay much higher than would be paid if they ran the farm, no way to pay the workers what they deserve – very challenging”

Lazaro Alvarez Andrade:

-“I came to know the cows over here – there are no cows in Mexico City”

-“We farmworkers come to this country to work and we have an extreme exploitation”

-“\$8.75/hr we do dirty work, poorly paid”

-I typed the following statements by Lazaro as accurately and quickly as I could:

“We realize we’re hired because it’s convenient for the farmers that we’re available. Farmers offer us housing, but the housing isn’t in a condition for a human being. But because of the necessities that we have in our country of our origin, we have to accept them. But really they’re dirty, [filled with] bacteria, rodents, not enough light, [and] too many hours of work. Work about 13 hours a day, don’t have access to a car to go to the store, all we do is work, kind of sleep, a little bit of eating, the technology isn’t arriving to our door. I know what a computer is and I’ve worked in an office and managed people, but the farmers here don’t respect us enough – they think we’re too ignorant. What they’re interested in is that we comply with protocol – that they have decided. They think that we’re machines, not human beings. We’re always run by a clock. We have to get there at a certain hour. Those cows don’t know about holidays or that we need to rest. Before it was called slavery, now it’s called exploitation – it’s the same. The biggest challenges we have with the bosses is that we can’t ask for a raise, we can’t raise our voice, we can’t fight for our rights. I have to buy all of my equipment to do my job, the knives we’re using, rastillo (translator was unsure of word in English), and realistically we’re right there among the manure – shit. We’re constantly exposed to accidents. One example I have very close to me, two months ago where I work, a cow kicked one of my coworkers in the right hand because the cow was young and wasn’t used to being milked and the cow hurt my coworker’s hand. They told the boss and they said, ‘Here’s another pill, I hope you do this more carefully, I don’t want to have more problems.’ I realized in the part where I work, a cow was bleeding on her stomach – they called the doctor, they take care of the calf... and I compared it. So the cow is more important than the human. My problem is that I’m Latino. But without a Latino, the milk wouldn’t come to your mouth. You wouldn’t be able to give milk to your children. We are the connection between the cows and the milk. Now when we tell the bosses that we have a problem, we feel bad and we need to go to the doctor, they tell us no. They put a lot of “buts” in. When we are late and can’t come [to work], they come and knock on the door and tell us we have to come work, regardless of extreme weather conditions. We are a part of the mechanization to support this part of our country because in our checks we pay taxes to the state. It’s convenient to the government of this country that we

are here. We didn't come here to take your jobs – it's the work Americans won't do that we're doing. So we realize we don't have benefits. Whatever happens to us, there's not government support, but we're paying taxes. I invite you to visit the dairy farms whenever you want – it's very hard work. The only ones that know what we're talking about are the ones that live it. The only difference is that it goes a little bit farther in our own country. But with \$8.75 in this country, an American can't live on that. We can't keep going with this process. For generations we've been exploited. What do I do? I'm a thoughtful person. Fortunately I have two children in Mexico that have work and didn't come to the USA. But, there are so many new generations of my country coming. So I got involved in the Workers' Center of CNY (also supported by Worker Justice Center). Still have to keep putting our head down and complying with what bosses are telling us to do. Bosses want to see us working but we are thoughtful people are we're trying to make our job easier. We don't have training; we're improvising. [There are] no protocol or methods for this process. The FDA isn't really revising what we're doing. They don't realize we're working for quality standards – the bosses want the process to keep going. The only [time they] realize me and the cow are the same is that when the cow no longer functions, they get rid of it. And for the migrant worker, they say they'll turn you over to immigration."

Sue Futrell

- Grew up in Midwest in Iowa; tenant farmers that raised livestock and corn
- Spent most of working life in food and agriculture field but from consumer point of view
- Worked at consumer food co-op in town
- Was a little bit removed from the actual farm
- Started working for Red Tomato – supplies produce – gained education on what it takes to grow food and produce and bring it to consumers

Three different challenges:

- "When you have that little distance from how things are grown, things are very simple. You hear about something bad happening, like Lazaro's story, you say that's bad and you want to stop it. When you know your food and know your farmer and understand what's going on, you realize how complicated it can get. When people with integrity and strong values come to terms with the challenges of the real world"
- Supply chain for fresh produce – customers want fantastic **top quality** produce which means the more experienced people are in picking and handling it the better; want **reliable supply** which means you need people picking at the exact right time; want **assurances about the safety and traceability of the product** – need more record keeping and equipment; want **good prices** – competing as a local market is very competitive against "Disney World"; everyone wants **something extra** – we promote local products and have packaging and advertising to get them in the door to an intensely competitive global supply chain
- Economics, cultural, and racial dynamic that put farmworkers and farmers in these situations are much bigger and complicated than anything else – biggest way we could make a change is to focus on immigration reform

Stories of challenges:

- When you get close, it gets complicated; after these stories, you come away with a very different picture of agriculture in NY State

-Southern Poverty Law Center – “Close to Slavery” talking about H2A (how Jamaicans get worker status in USA for example)

-Farms we at Red Tomato work with are mid size, fair minded, long time multigenerational growers – these people were offended that they would just be put into the category called agriculture, that includes the big farms that do the actual terrible things

-The farms we work with are great places to work, we care about the employees, when someone gets hurt we take them to the hospital – We needed to tell that story. Embarked on a 5 year process to unite farmworkers, worked with fair trade, united farmworkers

-Came up with the fact that immigration is really messing everything up – the looming outside anything that we can do in terms of practices issues we need to address

-Farmers from upstate NY addressed her and said she shouldn't keep going down this path – we do everything by the book and we aren't ashamed of anything we're doing here but we don't really know who's legal and who's illegal. We don't want people to live in fear and end up exposing them because we don't know if we're being watched or not.

Questions from Audience:

-In a world of workers where there's fear about immigration issues being documented or not and dealing with views of pretending this doesn't exist – What do you think is one step towards educating the public about the plight of farmworkers and bad working conditions, etc.? How would suggest advocating or supporting that?

- Pete: wanted to have farmworkers in different housing conditions that was a better place to live but the list of things you have to have to qualify for is so extensive and the number of inspections by the federal government and the state and independent groups asking to interview farmers without any notice; it seems to me there's a very large number of people on farms to see to it that NY state standards are being upheld; have to issue description of what you want the farmworker to do – inspectors come and take that wording and interview H2A workers to see whether anyone is doing anything that doesn't fit into the wording of that description – get very high penalty if they're not doing what they're “contracted to do”; level of management and interest in supervision is incredibly high
- Lazaro: we're here for a long time – others are only there for a little bit of time and that makes all the difference; the way that we find out about work is through our phones and social networks; many owners pay less than the minimum wage that what is established – I've worked on very small farms to very big cows 80-1000-5000 cows; Mark's Farm: 12 hours in the mornings and 12 hours at night, 365 days a year, the farm is always operating, there are no holidays and there are no sick days, 40 Americans and 40 Latin Americans; Americans' working conditions are much better. Communicate with white workers but limited by language – we're not less or more or equal
- Antonio: From Oaxaca – crossed the border walking, didn't have problems with immigration, but had problems in the dessert; arrived here looking for work and through phones found work through friends; when you arrive here you come with a debt of about \$6000 to get into this country and you get here you have a salary that the

boss tells you you're going to have – the number of hours the boss says is what you work. You have to accept these conditions because you have to pay off the debt you've incurred. The family in Mexico spent all their money and resources for us to get here. It seems difficult to understand, but some Mexicans come with contracts and fixed salaries. The poverty in Mexico is so extreme. Long process to get a visa to get contracted H2A. So to get here quicker, we walk and come as an immigrant. The first job we find, we start working.

- First problem: crossing the border
- Second problem: finding work
- Third problem: how police treat us
 - Immigration put me in detention – paid \$4000 to continue working here; now I have to go to court. To go to the store, we have to pay a driver because we don't have a license. I've worked up to 100 hours per week in my job at \$7/hour with no overtime. For a three-hour trip to the store I pay about \$100. They say they give us housing but they'll discount the housing from our checks. They take taxes, housing, electricity – they say it's free, but it's not free. Need rest and time to talk to family in Mexico. It's exhausting. Hard work is not valued in this country. I can't work right now because I hurt my back and my boss doesn't want to support me at all – not getting paid. That's the only reason I'm here at the conference.
- Carly Fox (translator) – need to fix working conditions; OSHA doesn't inspect dairy farms with less than 11 employees which is 98% of dairy farms in NY; if we pass immigration reform then we also need to focus on working conditions
 - Petition against Mark's Farm
 - "Want a nation not of hands, but of families"

Mary Jo – "Nobody wants to say that our agricultural system that depends on migrant workers is undervaluing migrant workers"

Pete – "We simply have a food system that is operating at less than the going rate for anybody; don't have the money to pay people what they're worth."

Audience member: What made you be different when its so easy to just give farm workers poor living conditions and pay them less to make a greater profit? (Directed to Pete)

Pete: He obeys the law – "I'd like to look like a hero but I'm just following regulations"