

Making the Business Case for Improved Farm Labor Conditions

The goal of this project is to generate much needed data to support the implementation and roll-out of the Equitable Food Initiative (EFI), a new voluntary certification program promoting reduced pesticide use, greater food safety, and improved farm labor conditions. EFI is a collaboration between farmworker unions, growers, retailers, and pesticide and food safety consumer advocacy organizations.

One of the underpinnings of EFI's approach is the creation of "Leadership Teams" on EFI-certified farms that consist of growers, farm managers, field supervisors, and field workers. This model is meant to ensure that all stakeholders understand EFI standards, create channels of communication and collaboration, and empower workers to report instances of non-compliance.

Objectives and Methods

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Objective: Develop a set of indicators that would identify and allow quantification of the costs and benefits of participating in EFI and (high-bar labor standards in general).

EFI by the numbers

Includes **19 farms** in US, Canada and Mexico

Covers **10,000** field workers

Goal of **100,000** workers by 2022



Strawberry pickers at Sierra Farms, an EFI-certified farm. Photo by Diane Villadsen.

Methods:

1. Literature review
2. Key informant interviews with academics
3. Grower interviews
4. Farmworker focus groups

Effectiveness of Leadership Teams

Objective: Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of EFI's Leadership Team implementation on five farms in the United States and Mexico.

Methods:

1. Observation of 5-day Leadership Team training in Mexico
2. Observations of Leadership Team meetings
3. Focus groups and key informant interviews with growers, farm managers, Leadership Team members, non-Leadership Team farmworkers, and academics

Findings

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A set of farm-level indicators were developed to assess impacts of improved labor conditions:

- Retention and access to a stable labor force
- Occupational health and safety
- Productivity
- Product quality
- Food safety
- Legal/lawsuits (wage and hour, sexual harassment, etc.)
- Marketing
- Worker satisfaction

Effectiveness of Leadership Teams

Benefits for workers:

- 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 and indigenous workers report reduced harassment and discrimination

Concerns:

- Awareness of specific labor standards is limited
- Potential for leadership “abuse” if not implemented well
- Role of women, indigenous workers, and contract workers on Leadership Teams
- Steep learning curve to successful implementation; additional support needed on some farms

Benefits for growers:

- Improved two-way communication; Leadership Teams convey information to and share feedback from field workers
- Growers are able to address workers’ concerns, which improves worker morale and satisfaction

- Leadership Teams often handle conflicts as they arise, freeing up supervisors’ time

Concerns:

- High training costs
- A lot of time spent “teaching to the test” to pass audit

Conclusions and Implications

Growers and workers reported many benefits associated with participation in EFI, including high levels of satisfaction with the EFI Leadership Team model. In fact, growers indicated that they would maintain the model even if it were not an EFI requirement. Overall, our findings suggest that with meaningful participation of farmworkers and farmworker organizations, market-based initiatives can be a promising mechanism for improving farm labor conditions. However, they are not a substitute for the ability of collective bargaining to put workers on a more level playing field. Next steps for further research include conducting a pre- and post-assessment of farms joining EFI (based on the indicators developed in this research) and comparing social certification programs in the United States.

Research Team

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