

NCAE recently wrapped its 6th Annual Ag Labor Forum at the M Resort. The event was a tremendous success with speakers and attendees from across the country. The Guatemalan Minister of Labor and a representative of the Barbados Labor Ministry were also on hand. Year over year attendance was up almost 30%!

US agricultural employers displayed once again their commitment to educating themselves around ag labor compliance.

One of the attorneys who spoke to the audience made a point during her presentation that I think is very important in today's litigious environment. She admonished the assemblage to always "wear a white hat" when it comes to agricultural labor.

Last April 22nd, an anti-farmer activist organization updated a widely disseminated memorandum containing inflammatory rhetoric regarding US agricultural employers and their relationship with the workers they employ.

The activists stated, "The H2A guest-worker visa program is fraught with abuse and fraud. For example, recruiters often illegally charge Mexican workers exorbitant recruitment and transportation fees. Then, once on farms, workers are often victims of abusive labor practices and are, again, charged exorbitant prices for things like meals and lodging, creating situations of debt-peonage."

Obviously, the activist organization is attempting to fundraise while defaming employers. They must feel if they cast outrageous aspersions upon American farmers and ranchers, it will somehow advance their cause and boost their income statement. Perhaps they desire to so incense their fact-free target audience that, unwittingly duped by this slander, the targets will reach into their pockets and shower the activists with cash to assist in their dark, malevolent scheme.

Farmers and ranchers can turn this back on the bad guys. We can uncover their deceit and remove incentives for the unknowing to be duplicitous with them.

We can do this by always "wearing a white hat".

Agricultural employers are some of the best people I have ever met. And, when it comes to dealing with their workers, employers recognize explicitly the exceptional value workers bring to their businesses. And the workers recognize this truth as well.

Every couple of years, the US Department of Labor performs the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS). Contrary to the anti-farmer activists' claims, the 2018 NAWS found that, *"Farmworkers in 2015-2016 worked for an average of 1 U.S. farm employer in the 12 months*

prior to being interviewed. Eighty percent of workers reported having worked for only 1 farm employer in the previous 12 months, 13 percent worked for 2 employers, and 7 percent had 3 or more farm employers. At the time of interview, farmworkers had been employed by their current farm employer for an average of 7 years. The majority of farmworkers interviewed in 2015-2016 expected to continue doing farm work for more than 5 years (76%)."

So, not only did the farmworkers typically return to their current employer year after year, the workers intended to continue in the vocation. So much for the activists' slanderous claims. Facts matter.

However, there is a lesson to be learned from this. Agricultural employers should always "wear a white hat". Activists are going to continue and try to push their false narrative. But by agricultural employers' continued positive performance, even the most gullible of the anti-farmer activists' low hanging targets, will grow weary of their nonsense. No matter how often they repeat it.

The takeaway for agricultural employers from this is straightforward. Always deal with workers ethically and with integrity. Constantly strive to ensure compliance with laws and regulations. In addition to cultivating crops in your operation, cultivate the culture within the workplace to be the one that farmers and ranchers are known for. A culture of decency and respect.

Agriculture can be "as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us." We must lead by example through our work and through our values, in how we feed the world and in how we care for our workers.