Michigan’s Food and Agriculture Workforce

In the past decade, Michigan’s food and agriculture industry has grown 60 percent and is fast approaching $100 billion in annual economic impact. This growth trajectory is impressive and is indicative of an opportunity for more sustainable industry growth.

A preliminary analysis of industry trends and input from all partners indicates a need for a comprehensive workforce capacity building plan for Michigan’s food and agriculture industry. The plan will integrate and align existing resources within and across the public, private, and independent sectors to supply the food and agriculture industry with appropriately skilled workers. A key objective of the project is to look at workforce in two tracks:

The first track is to identify gaps between current workforce, capacity building activities, and the activities required for growth and retention of the industry. Central to this analysis is a shared understanding that training and education are key to workforce capacity building, and are most valuable to the industry when the knowledge and skills are relevant to the work at hand.

The second track is to recruit, retain, and schedule an agriculture labor workforce (which is referred to as migrant labor). This labor force is needed for on-farm production, processing, and service providers to the industry. The whole of Michigan’s economy benefits from the strength and diversity of our agricultural sector. That strength and diversity is rooted in Michigan’s soils, climate, and farm families. However, much of it also relies on the skill, speed, and stamina of a migrant workforce. This highly specialized workforce harvests and packs fresh and processed fruits and vegetables from spring through fall harvest.

These aforementioned tracks create an opportunity for Michigan to leverage its record of creativity, innovation, and ingenuity in the food, agriculture, and related industries including livestock, dairy, grains, fruit and vegetables, forestry, nursery, and landscape to meet a growing local, domestic, and global demand. This system produces, processes, manufactures, and distributes products in greater quantity at an affordable cost to consumers, while sustaining the industry’s business interests. Now is the optimal time to create alignment between industry, government, and education on their shared role in workforce capacity building. Whole thinking about the entire eco-system from growing and harvesting through the manufacturing process and the regulatory environment at a regional, national, and global level will drive success.
Michigan agriculture is in a position to compete at a higher level. Industry is investing in technology and innovation necessary to compete within a globalized food system; however, without human capital, growth is impossible. We need to decide how to invest in the industry to spur systematic renewal and growth around workforce capacity building.

The attached document *Food and Agriculture Workforce Capacity-Building in Michigan* prepared by the International Food Protection Training Institute (IFPTI) for MDARD through the Strategic Growth Initiative presents a focused and critical examination of the food and agriculture workforce capacity building in Michigan with a summary of recommendations for implementation.

**Recommendations Summary:**

Based on select preliminary findings presented to MDARD on August 28, 2014, by the International Food Protection Training Institute regarding the project titled, *A Focused Critical Examination of Food and Agriculture Workforce Capacity Building in Michigan*, six urgent needs emerged. They are:

1) There is a need for a directive from the Governor’s office to convene workforce capacity-building stakeholders to devise and adopt a collaborative strategy for the food and agriculture industry. A coordinated approach will maximize the unique strengths of each stakeholder. The directive should be led by MDARD.

2) There is a need to generate accurate data on employee and employer needs, and to have a consensus on the interpretations of that data among stakeholders. This pertains to job availability, labor force, and workforce readiness. Consultation with economist(s), social welfare agencies and/or other appropriately skilled subject matter expert(s) to determine, based on relevant data, the economic and social impact of workforce capacity interventions.

3) There is a need for standardized training curricula, and courses to impart knowledge, skills, and abilities specifically identified and valued by employers, as shown in Illustration 4 in the preliminary report (page 35). Proposed is to:
   a. Conduct analysis to design, develop, and deliver a competency-based curriculum and courses that address employer interests across the food supply system for all levels of personnel.
   b. Create a credentialed training program with personnel credentials.

4) There is a need for credentialed instructors to deliver the courses prescribed in the curriculum, and a need for a system through which instructors can operate independently across the state. Reaching the food and agriculture sector workforce is a challenge due to the nature of the industry (seasonal, rural, and dispersed) and the availability of the workers who are often migrant or not college-bound. A mobile, independent instructor system will compliment traditional, place-based instruction by reaching the workforce “in the field.” Proposed is to:
   a. Design, develop, and deliver an initial “train the trainer” program.
b. Design a system for dissemination of training by independent, credentialed instructors.
c. Create a personnel credential.

5) There is a need for industry support for efforts that prepare individuals for employment.
   a. Convene industry stakeholders and gain consensus on training and credentialing.
   b. Secure industry commitment to employment.
   c. Create an outreach component.

6) Devise a marketing and communications strategy that promotes Michigan’s food and agriculture industry.

Track 2

Industry has expressed a need to systematically increase the number and quality of seasonal and permanent workers. Michigan’s food and agriculture industry depends heavily upon migrant and seasonal workers; an estimate by the State Monitor Advocate Gerry Aranda is between 40,000 and 45,000 workers per year. Michigan should strive to create a statewide system to promote job opportunities and strive to become a national leader in this arena. If we fail, we risk losing the diversity of our product mix and the strength of our state’s economy.

Some of the labor gaps in Michigan’s food and agriculture industry could be addressed by tapping non-traditional sources of talent and utilizing existing proven employment models and creating new ones. These labor sources include disadvantaged/at risk youth, people with disabilities, refugees, immigrants, veterans, returning citizens, people receiving public assistance, and others.

A workgroup has formed to identify and address the items referenced below. The workgroup is comprised of the Governor’s Office for New Americans, MDARD, Michigan Farm Bureau, Michigan Commodity Executives, and the Workforce Development Agency. The following outline is designed to support discussion on issues which, if addressed, would improve the ability of the food and agricultural industry in Michigan to attract labor with required skills and enhance our ability to retain and develop those resources.

1) Promote establishment of a “Preferred Employer” program that meets employers’ needs for recruitment services and training. This would be a partnership established between MDARD and the industry.

   a) Build on Michigan Farm Bureau’s employer training on housing, I-9, wage and hour, field sanitation, and safety issues.

   b) Recognize trained growers with licensed or registered housing as Preferred Employers. Offer both core training on critical items and continuing education options for advanced employer/employee relations.

   c) Build in-season communication within the industry to serve both early season growers and referring workers to later-season growers.
d) Increase migrant labor housing both on and off farm.

e) Improve retention and return of migrant labor.

f) Establish a multi-lingual website allowing Preferred Employers to connect with potential labor.
   i) Map job locations.
   ii) Use icons showing the crop and employment availability.
   iii) Clicking on an active icon would provide information on the employer and job specifics.

g) Develop cost share model for recruitment trips out of Michigan.

The attached document Strategic Growth Initiative Concerning Michigan Agricultural Labor Shortage Resources has been drafted by Varnum Law to analyze and outline the potential options around an H-2A Worker Service program for the State of Michigan through the Strategic Growth Initiative.

Recommendation Summary:

1) Recruitment Services. Support development of recruitment entity for domestic agricultural workers. Website recruitment would involve web development, farm labor contractor registration, IT services support, and compliance/customer service support.

2) Explore Migrant Housing Program to build and operate migrant housing to use as recruitment tool for agricultural workforce and to minimize agricultural employer liability for housing compliance.

3) Compliance and Legal Assistance Programs. MDARD may connect employers to existing resources without cost. A voluntary employer certification program could be implemented with incremental certification inspector costs. Fees could be charged to off-set inspector costs. The Legal Assistance Program business plan could be developed through initial risk assessment (could use Certification Program to assess) and then premiums adjusted through individual and collective employer claims experience.

4) Fund development of H-2A Services Entity. This review provides the analysis of available private options and tool-kit to implement operations. Interested private parties could be encouraged to start-up entity with investment costs covered or subsidized by MDARD. Start-up costs will vary depending on the potential investors, entity choice, and the scope of the entity.

Examples of Best Practices

Michigan is ripe for the types of public/private sector partnership that evade other states. It is imperative that education is demand driven and flexible, and the design and delivery system be rapid and part of a system that many stakeholders will own and cultivate. The following are examples of innovative programs and partnerships that are cultivating the importance of agriculture and food processing and building workforce capacity in Michigan.
Forgotten Harvest – Addresses the training and educational needs of a rapidly growing local food industry and provides meaningful training for skills and an opportunity for living wage around farming, logistics, and processing for unemployed, underemployed, and veterans.

Goodwill Farm to Freezer Project – A community-based job training program that flash freezes produce from local farms in Northern Michigan that is sold to schools and retail stores. The program focuses on transitional employment opportunities for disabled and disadvantaged populations. Food Service training and Safe Food Handler is taught in both English and Spanish.

Connections Program – West Coast Chamber/Holland Zeeland Model Community – connects kids 6th – 12th grade to a host company to immerse them in business thinking and problem solving on a real world scale. Business is leading these types of initiatives in an effort to grow their own talent.

Michigan State University - Institute of Agriculture Technology and Department of Education are conducting workshops with high school counselors around opportunities in agriculture and how to prepare students and link them to industry. They are also working with community colleges to articulate credits and to create programs like Ag Aspirations.

New Life Center in Flint – Trains individuals for area food processors in the food service industry. These participants are in the Michigan Economic Development Corporation’s Community Ventures Program.

E.W. Grobbel & Sons – America’s oldest corned beef specialist (120 years) is committed to growing talent through the ACE Pledge: Attitude, Competency, and Energy. These three principles guide how they evaluate potential workforce. Skill matching through interactive video games and technology are used to keep employees up to date in real time. This system has created a workforce with longevity.

Ag-Partnership Unlimited – An on-line community cooperative connecting east Michigan producers, processors, students, entrepreneurs, ag Community groups, ag support organizations, and advocates focused on supporting and promoting the agricultural sector in Michigan.

UP Food Exchange - Participating in a pilot study exploring new ways to address challenges of food safety certifications for small farms. This group will investigate a collective certification model called Group GAP to mitigate the risk and financial burden by sharing resources. These types of collaborative programs continue to grow the small farms and keep farmers up to speed to provide regional economies with local food. The food safety programs open-up markets for growers so they can diversify and add production.

The above are examples of business and community partnerships scattered throughout the state where workers who might be considered non-traditional to agriculture are becoming successfully employed in ag-related jobs. Partnership with food processing plants, retail distribution centers, farms and other food-based enterprises could drive the demand for these types of training and employment programs where employees are receiving support and talent development.
MDARD offers the following recommendations for action to be accomplished through collaboration and partnership with the industry and stakeholders:

1) Convene workforce capacity building with all stakeholders, with Governor’s office support identifying MDARD to lead the collaborative strategy for the food and agriculture industry. To be completed in three months.

2) Develop and implement a communications strategy, including education, outreach, recruitment, internships, and web-based tools, to grow and sustain interest in the food and agriculture industry. To be completed in six months.

3) Define employer workforce needs and work with the training and HR community to deliver appropriate training and counseling. To be done in six months.

4) Design, develop, and deliver a competency-based curriculum and coordinate a credentialed training program course that addresses employer interests across the food supply system for all levels of personnel, using the successful model of MAT2 and/or adding Coop programs back into High schools. Dependent on funding availability, would be completed in one year.

5) Develop and implement a preferred employer program including a review of current program support and development of a recruitment entity for domestic agricultural workers. To be completed in one year.

6) Connect employers to existing resources voluntary employer certification program with incremental certification inspector costs. Fees could be charged to off-set inspector costs. To be completed in one year.

7) Create a list of needed legislative actions as the workgroup develops the strategy of workforce capacity building with all industry stakeholders for the food and agriculture industry.

8) Increase funding to MDARD for migrant labor housing for both on and off-farm housing, which can be used as a recruitment tool for agricultural workforce and to minimize agricultural employer liability for housing compliance.

In Closing

The continued growth of the food and agriculture sector is creating an overwhelming gap in workforce for both skilled and unskilled labor. As a state, we must address the issues facing the industry if we intend to attract companies to Michigan and grow those companies who call Michigan their home. An overwhelming number of growers and processors are struggling to find employees with the skill set they need. By addressing the issues in this paper and taking a proactive approach, we will come a long way toward finding solutions to the problems facing the industry. As a state, we have an incredible opportunity to illustrate to our constituents we hear them and we are taking action.