Citrus Harvest Meeting Kit

BEST PRACTICES AROUND MANAGING HARVEST LABOUR FOR FRUIT GROWERS

Harvest is a busy and stressful time. That is why it is important to implement some good practices when it comes to sourcing and maintaining labour, to make this process run as smoothly as possible.

PLAN EARLY

Try to plan early and work out what your needs will be and how you plan to source labour. Use the resources available such as your local Harvest Labour Office, National Harvest Labour Information Service, advertising in your local paper, online and don’t forget the power of social media.

FIRST PRIORITY IS KEEPING PEOPLE SAFE

Having a safe workplace is very important when sustaining labour on your farm. You should always provide an informative and specific induction when you have new staff starting on your farm that covers how they are to perform their job safely and effectively, how to refrain from damaging fruit, where facilities are, and any other relevant information for working on your orchard.

Clear communication is a must. Ensure that on your staff’s first day that all parties are clear on everything including expected hours, pay rates, what they will pick, what fruit you need them to pick (whether it is colour picking, strip picking or you only require a certain percentage off the tree), as well as how long you are expecting your harvest to last and any expected breaks.

TWO HAZARDS – DANGER OF FALLING AND BACK INJURIES

The two greatest hazards involved in harvesting lemons, oranges and grapefruit are the danger of falling from the ladder and the possibility of back injury from carrying heavy bags full of fruit.

When the orchard floor is wet, mud cakes on the bottom of workers' shoes, and the shoes become slippery. Climbing ladders with muddy, slippery footwear greatly increases a worker's chance of falling.

To further complicate matters, when the orchard floor is wet, the ladder can sink unevenly into the mud with the weight of the picker and become off balance. Pickers carry heavy loads of the fruit they are picking. This affects balance and, since pickers are using their hands to pick rather than hold on to the ladders, they are at even greater risk of falling.

WEAR CLEATED SHOES

Citrus harvesters should always use shoes that have cleated soles. Under wet conditions, these cleats will fill up with mud, and workers will have to take the time to occasionally scrape the mud off the bottom of their shoes.

IMPORTANT PICKING CRITERIA AND CONSIDERATIONS

Workers should check each time before climbing to make sure their ladders are resting evenly on the orchard floor. If one of the legs has sunk into the mud, the ladder should be adjusted so that it is balanced before the picker climbs back up. When climbing up the ladder, the rule is to never go beyond the third rung from the top. Going higher will make the ladder unstable and more likely to tip over.

Picking should start from the top of the tree, with pickers moving downward on the ladder as their bags become fuller and heavier.

Crew leaders should discourage their workers from reaching too far for fruit when they are on ladders. When all nearby fruit has been picked, harvesters should climb down and move the ladder rather then try to save time by reaching precariously and risking a fall.

Care should be taken in lifting. A full bag of citrus can weigh up to 80 pounds. Harvesters are constantly carrying these heavy loads while climbing and bringing bags to larger containers and dumping their load. All of this is being done while hurrying to get as much fruit picked as possible. Workers should receive training at the beginning of the season regarding the best way to carry heavy loads.

Workers should be encouraged to lift with their legs rather than with their backs. The weight in the bags should be distributed evenly; bags should not hang off to one side of the body and the weight should be carried as close as possible to the harvester's body.

TRAINING

Training should include the following:

- identification of potential contamination of fruit or equipment and to avoid picking citrus that may be contaminated with pathogens.
- hand washing techniques.
- use of toilet facilities requires proper glove use and storage, proper trash disposal.
- food consumption only outside production area.
- proper handling and storage of equipment.
- no glass containers brought into grove.
- prompt treatment for cuts, abrasions and other injuries.
- reporting signs of illness to the supervisor before beginning work.

BEST PICKING PRACTICES FOR WORKERS

- Check ladders each time before climbing to make sure they are resting evenly on the ground.
- Always maintain three points of contact when climbing the ladder.
- Establish a secure position on the ladder while picking and balancing the bag of fruit.
- Never climb beyond the third rung from the top of the ladder.
- Check your ladder for damage, and don’t use the ladder if it is damaged.
- If the ground is wet, make sure the ladder isn’t sinking into the mud.
- Check shoes and ladder rungs to keep them free of mud build-up, to avoid creating a slippery surface.
- Don’t “over-reach” for the fruit. Leaning too far to one side or the other can cause the ladder to fall.
- Picking should start from the top of the tree, with pickers moving downward on the ladder.
- Stretch muscles before and during the workday to help prevent strains and reduce fatigue.
- never pick up citrus fruit from the ground if to be used for human consumption.

FINAL WORD

The general public does not have the complete picture how that healthy and tasty fruit end up at the supermarket. It takes planning and patience by growers including an appreciation what practices/procedures must be put into place with respect to the workforce that makes it all happen.