

Growers, industry save specialty crops learning program

By Gary Pullano
Assistant Editor

Minnesota growers, educators and private industry have joined forces to preserve a program that helps farmers receive in-depth technical and management instruction essential to producing and marketing higher-quality produce.

Formerly housed at a community college in East Grand Forks, the Specialty Crops Management program was discontinued in 2012 before the Minnesota Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association (MFVGA) spearheaded an effort to revive and relocate it to Central Lakes College (CLC), based in Brainerd.

Dell Christianson, a retired instructor who remains active with the program, pointed to intense grower efforts to keep the program in operation after it was shut down in 2012.

“We knew that in order to continue the program, it would need to be relocated, and essentially start-up funds would need to be generated to cover the initial re-development costs and expenses associated with getting another college to accept the program,” Christianson said.

MFVGA secured a USDA Specialty Crops Block Grant through the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. The Minnesota Ag Education Leadership Council provided additional funding.

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Photos: Dell Christianson
Cindy Felming, above, is president of the Minnesota Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association.

Thaddeus McCamant, left, specialty crops management, Central Lakes College, checks on a strawberry field.

Growers anticipating labor shortages

By Matt Milkovich
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In August, fruit and vegetable growers were preparing for harvest, and many were wondering if they would have enough workers for the busy fall season. Stepped-up federal immigration enforcement and immigration-reform legislation that appeared to be in limbo in Congress contributed to their uncertainty.

“No one knows where this is going,” said Michael Geary, executive director of the Ohio Produce Growers & Marketers Association.

Geary had heard that some Ohio growers were experiencing labor shortages. Until the immigration situation gets sorted

out and growers know they’ve secured a reliable labor supply, they’re going to have a hard time planning for the future, he said.

National statistics only give part of the story: Farm operators hired 732,000 workers for the week of April 7-13, down 2 percent from the same period in 2012, according to USDA’s National Agricultural Statistics Service.

By late July, however, the supply of workers for labor-intensive crops – which include fruits and vegetables – appeared to have reached “critical lows,” according to Frank Gasperini, executive vice president of the National Council of Agricultural Employers.

New York’s agricultural output could be reduced by more than \$1.5 billion.

Gasperini blamed the lows on continuing immigration enforcement, state-specific laws, the aging of existing farm workers and an overall improving economy. He’d heard from dozens of growers from around the country, who told him that fewer workers than expected were showing up for planting and harvest, that H-2A guest workers were delayed and farm-labor contractors were supplying fewer people than requested – and they were arriving later or leaving earlier than hoped for.

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