

# It's Not Just You:

## HELP WANTED IN RURAL AMERICA

*Technology and immigrants are a patch for the labor crisis in the cattle business.*

*by Miranda Reiman, director of digital content and strategy*



When Greek farmers moved to the United States in the early 20th century, they felt the pull of the mountains. The western slope of Colorado felt like home.

The same remote, spacious country they found ideal is their Achilles' heel today — in a world of modern conveniences, it's hard to find anyone who wants to move so far from them.

John Raftopoulos, Diamond Peak Ranch, and his two sons raise Angus and Simmental cattle on both deeded land and public and private leases where his parents first raised sheep near Craig, Colo. They've expanded grazing into northwest Colorado and southern Wyoming, and cattle can sometimes cover 65 miles in a single grazing season. Rotations are labor intensive, and it's easier to find grass than it is people to help manage it.

"It's hard to get people to stay out on these ranges; big, wide-open spaces where you're not coming into town, you're living in a bunkhouse," Raftopoulos says.

Location is one hurdle, and the difficulty of the work is another.

"People aren't as tough as they used to be," he says.

That sentiment echoes throughout ranch country where the vast majority of producers report struggling to find enough help. It can be a crushing feeling, with the "to-do" list longer than the "done" one, completing more and more daylight tasks after sundown.

If that sounds familiar, odds are you have firsthand experience with the U.S. labor crisis.

### More work, fewer workers

"It's just so much more difficult to find labor, and partly it's our ag demographics," says Troy Marshall, director of commercial industry relations for the American Angus Association. "As producers get bigger to be economically relevant, the challenge of finding good labor is becoming increasingly tougher."

The numbers back that story. According to the USDA's Farm Labor Survey, the number of hired farmworkers dropped from 2.1 million in 1950 to around 1.13 million in 2000 — nearly a 50% reduction.

At the same time, the number of self-employed farmers and ranchers fell at an even greater rate down to 2.06 million in 2000. The proportion of farm work done by hired hands is much greater today than it was a half a century ago.

"One of the real challenges is we have such high expectations in this business and expect so much of our employees, and we do have a changing workforce out there," Marshall notes. "We may ask too much for a lot of people. We've got to make it where they can enjoy it and make a sustainable living, so they can make a long-term commitment."

Yet, the cattle business is dynamic and responsive, he says. Even though finding good help is getting to be a desperate situation, there is hope.

"In rural America, it's still always about the family," Marshall says, and those who are most successful at keeping long-term help have leaned in to that. "They create that culture where I think employees feel they're part of a family, and they provide a work environment now where those guys have opportunity for recreation and family time."

It's about being creative, persistent and patient, Marshall adds.

### Recruiting, retaining the right ones

Nebraska cattleman Chris Gentry can claim all three. He calls the Nebraska Sandhills home. It's beautiful country for raising cattle; but similar to Raftopoulos, he says its remoteness makes it a hard place to attract workers to.

The hours — especially during busy seasons like calving and breeding — can be long, the weather fickle and the general job description somewhat unpredictable.

"The housing situation in town is terrible," he says. "We have one house in

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town that we'll use for an employee if we have to, but only for a short time."

Gentry employs a handful of people to help on their commercial Angus operation and provides on-ranch housing, a vehicle and locally purchased groceries.

"They've got to be able to feed their family and then have some more on top of that," he says. "You start them out in a package that will grow, because if you just have a stuck, dead-end deal and they don't have a chance to grow, that's when they'll want to go."

Gentry says he's fortunate that most of his current ranch help was already part of the team when his dad was at the helm. Some have been there more than three decades, but when Gentry does have an open position, it can take months to fill. That's partly because there are few takers, and partly because he wants to get it right.

"I try to get a feel for who they are before I hire them, versus just hiring somebody blind and then wondering what you got," Gentry explains. "Anytime we've ever had an issue, it's pretty much been that way."

They're an "everybody pitches in" crew, where nobody is saddled with the worst work. Instead, they divide it.

"I really avoid the 'all cowboy' type, the guy who just wants to ride horses," Gentry says, noting they never find the repetitive farm chores appealing in the long run. "I want somebody who is eager and has got energy. I'll teach them everything they want to know if they've got that."

He doesn't advertise openings, but instead relies on word of mouth or lets a potential employee's reputation speak for itself. Self-starters fit with the long-term crew.

"They like going out and not having somebody tell them what to do every day," Gentry says, "and most of the time they do. They go out, they know what needs to be done, and they don't want to be constantly told, 'this is what you need to do, and this is how you need to do it.'"

## Getting creative

Marshall says employees may have ideas on ways to make their jobs more efficient, too.

"When I used to work at CattleFax, we'd tell everyone iron was a bad thing, and the inverse is kind of true now," he says. "Anytime you can find equipment and labor-saving devices to make life more enjoyable and easier, it makes them happier and could possibly reduce your labor need."

Better designed facilities or new working chutes can reduce the numbers needed for processing and pregnancy checking, and some are testing laser-triggering technology that allows for automatically closing chutes, Marshall says. Autonomous feed trucks are now in production, companies have wireless health monitoring and heat-detecting technologies, and the list of innovation goes on.

Sometimes it's not what the ranch could start doing, it's what they stop doing that makes the difference.

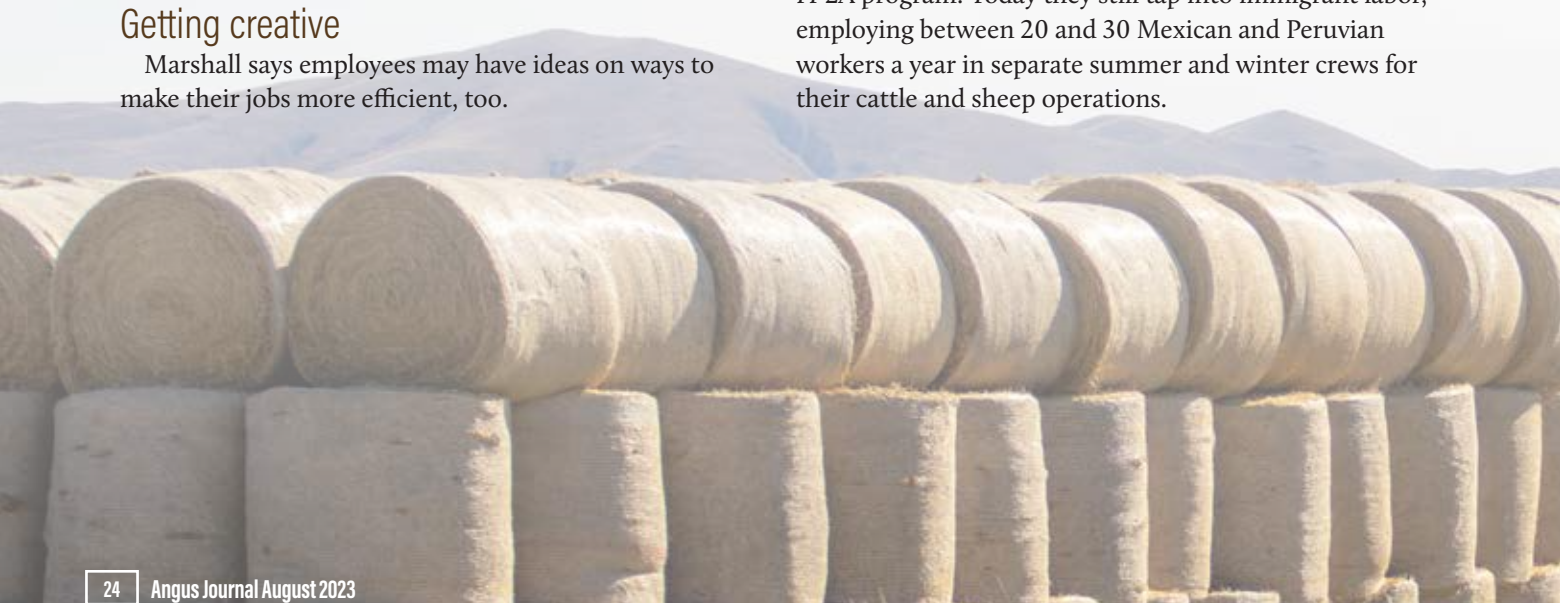
"We had a neighbor on a large operation, and their employees hated building fence, so now they contract out a couple miles with fence work every year," Marshall says. "Hiring some of that can eliminate those jobs that people don't like to do and others can do even better."

A hard look at the business model might suggest opportunities for outsourcing. Perhaps paying somebody to develop heifers or grow your calves is more feasible than hiring an additional person.

## Help from afar

Getting creative sometimes means looking beyond local communities. For some cattlemen, that's participating in the H-2A Temporary Agricultural Worker Program to bring foreign workers to the United States as relief for seasonal work.

In the 1950s, the Raftopoulos family first brought Greek shepherds from their native country to herd the sheep out on the range, and in the 1970s they started using the H-2A program. Today they still tap into immigrant labor, employing between 20 and 30 Mexican and Peruvian workers a year in separate summer and winter crews for their cattle and sheep operations.



“If we didn’t have those guys, we would be out of business because we just can’t find enough labor,” Raftopoulos says.

The federal programs have changed over the years with more rules and regulations than ever, but he says the key to making the relationship work is the same as always.

“No matter if it’s immigrant labor or domestic labor, you’ve just got to get people that you can trust that have your interest in mind, so in that way it’s no different than running a corporation or any other kind of thing,” Raftopoulos explains.

When he finds a worker who fits their operation, he tries to hire others from that same family or community.

“That’s been our kind of our savior, finding the guys that come from great families, that have a great work ethic, respect what they’re doing, value what they’re doing,” Raftopoulos says.

The more he can hire back repeat workers or give the more experienced the task of training new ones, the better it makes the whole team.

“You have to show them they lay of the land and how you treat your animals,” he says. “You’ve got to train them to the way you manage, because it’s different than the way they are managed in Mexico.”

Over the years, Raftopoulos says workers have become “less resilient,” and as family sizes decrease and economic situations improve, fewer will be willing to take on the work he offers. At the same time, other ag sectors compete for those same workers.

A USDA report on labor says, “One of the clearest indicators of the scarcity of farm labor is the fact that the number of H-2A positions requested and approved has increased more than sevenfold in the past 17 years, from just over 48,000 positions certified in fiscal 2005 to around 371,000 in fiscal year 2022.”

Jerry and Sharon Connealy, Whitman, Neb., are in their second year of employing South African workers through the program. Friends put them in touch with an agency to help with recruitment, paperwork and general counsel through the process.

“For people like us, they are a very important liaison,” Sharon says, noting the agency got visas and passports in place. “We had to have records from the American Angus Association to prove we calve four times a year, to get that extended from a three- or four-month contract to ten months. So, there is a ton of red tape to get started.”

The farmers and ranchers must pay for the immigrant’s transportation to and from their homes, provide fully furnished housing (that passes the Department of Labor inspection), and pay a specific wage that varies by state.

“South African agriculture is vastly different than here, and we struggle to find people that have much cattle experience,” Jerry says.

Plus, when they’re already strapped for labor, it’s hard to find time to slow down and teach, he says. Add to that some very extreme circumstances, including a negligent worker burning down their modular housing, and they’re having a hard time getting a return on investment.

They’ve used it as a “Band-Aid®” today, but the challenges make the Connealys even more committed to redoubling efforts to find labor locally, where those dollars are reinvested in their community. They aren’t completely writing it off, but it’s not a magic wand either, Sharon says.

For Raftopolus the H-2A program allows him to operate at the scale he needs to in the mountain desert.

“If you expand it, you grow and get bigger, you’ve got to have people you can trust because you can’t do it all yourself,” he says.

The future is changing, but the need for a true stockman will remain. For all the advances in technology, or even by making cattle less labor intensive through breeding for traits like calving ease, the power of a person can’t be replaced, Marshall says.

“There are certain jobs that will always require manual labor,” he notes. “They require somebody to be able to think and make decisions, and we just can’t replicate the value of a human being in those types of roles. Especially people who truly care about the land and the animals and are committed.” 