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CAEP J-1 Program Benefits America's Dairy Industry

While the two major political parties in Washington, D.C. and state legislatures across the country continue to fail in any attempts to reach agreement on what to do with the country's broken immigration system, America's dairy farmers continue to struggle finding the labor necessary to produce the nation's milk supply. From California to New York, and everywhere in between, milk producers face the same problems in finding a legal and dependable workforce.

Unemployment in California is more than 12 percent, but La Salle Dairy, located outside of Firebaugh, California, has still been unable to find dependable domestic workers. "It's a real struggle," said Bob La Salle, who along with his wife Joanne own and operate La Salle Dairy. "Domestic workers coming to my farm just don't have the experience or desire to work with cows. We try to find domestic workers, but they just don't last. In the past 3 years we have gone through 20 domestic workers and have only had one that is still working for us. They are simply looking for a job, and that's a real problem because it's not easy work. You have to love working with cows or the cows will struggle, and if the cows struggle, our business struggles." 1,700 miles away in North Dakota the unemployment rate is the lowest in the country at less than 4 percent, but the inability of dairies to fill their labor needs is the same. "In the dairy industry right now, it is so hard. With milk prices so low, it is very difficult," stated Kathy Goetz of Goetz Dairy in Sterling, North Dakota.

As members of Communicating for Agriculture (CA), both La Salle Dairy and Goetz Dairy utilize the J-1 trainee and intern visa program through the CA Education Programs (CAEP). The J-1 visa program is a 12 to 18 month trainee and intern program in which participants are required to have a minimum of one year experience in their field as well as a minimum level of

proficiency in English. The Communicating for Agriculture Foundation has had authority from the US State Department to issue applications for J-1 training visas in agriculture since 1985. CAEP works with partners in 50 different countries to find qualified participants with the knowledge and skills necessary to contribute to their host farms.

La Salle Dairy has been using the J-1 program since 1985, when they got their first trainee by what Bob describes as an accident. “But that first trainee was a success, and we have been using the J-1 program ever since.” LaSalle Dairy has hosted more than 150 young people on their farm on the J-1 program. “We rely heavily on the J-1 trainee program. J-1 trainees are interested in agriculture, are ambitious, and are intelligent. We get a much higher level of applicant through the J-1 program than we do through domestic workers. We have to have good employees to get a good product, and the J-1 trainees have been that for us.”

Goetz Dairy has been using the J-1 program for more than 10 years. “The trainees that we have had on our farm through the J-1 program want to learn, they have a strong interest in dairy, and they work hard. They are an important part of our operation,” added Kathy.

Bob La Salle notes that the J-1 program can have positive economic impacts on the industry as well. He describes 3 separate situations in which his trainees have visited other dairies in California, established contacts, and imported semen to farms in their home countries upon their return in order to improve breeding stock. “In that way, the J-1 program opens doors, promotes exchange, and benefits the US economy.”

At a time when America’s milk producers are struggling to meet their labor needs with domestic workers, and the temporary guest worker program is unavailable to most dairy operations, the J-1 trainee and intern program could be the best and most flexible alternative for America’s dairy farmers needing a reliable and legal source of foreign workers. “We need year-round workers. We milk cows 3 times a day, every day, 365 days a year,” Bob continue. “It has just been so difficult to find dependable domestic labor. Right now, we have a very good labor supply with our J-1 trainees.”

Kathy Goetz believes that the J-1 program benefits all involved. “We like the trainees, we like their help, we like learning from their cultures, and like when the trainees are able to go through the program and return and apply what they have learned to farms in their home countries.”

Past Goetz Dairy intern Rafael Cruvinel from Brazil agrees. “I’m so happy. This program was very important to me. I learned many things about dairy farm and about life too,” he wrote. “I loved my host family. It was most important experience in my life.”

For more information on Communicating for Agriculture, the CA Education Programs and the J-1 program contact Maja Behrens at 1-888-634-5233, mbehrens@cainc.org, or visit the CAEP website at www.caep.org.