

Posted on Mon, Jan. 30, 2006

INTERNATIONAL

Of milk and multiculturalism

U.S. dairy farmers build bridges to their Mexican workers

By Cara Anna

Associated Press

CASTORLAND, N.Y.

Kerrie Baker's two Mexican employees live above her dining room. They don't speak English and she knows about 30 words of Spanish, but they get by with smiles and the occasional visiting interpreter to the remote, upstate New York dairy farm.

So when Baker said she was leaving for Mexico last month, the men didn't quite believe her. Then she returned with photos of their mountain village, and even of one man's startled mother. When the woman realized who Baker was, she started crying and said, "Take care of my baby."

Baker and other farmers didn't wait for Congress to take up immigration reform this month -- they crossed the border to understand the issue by visiting the far-flung homes of their employees.

But they don't go just for charity, says Wisconsin dairy farmer John Rosenow. Instead, the trips are an investment in a kind of worker they hope won't disappear.

Hispanics make up about 40 percent of all U.S. agricultural employees based on 2004 census figures, the Pew Hispanic Center said.

But the interest comes from the newest farmers hiring Mexicans, the dairy farmers along America's northern edge. A Cornell University survey said 72 percent of the largest farms in New York, the third-largest dairy-producing state, hired their first Hispanic employee since 2000.

LANGUAGE BARRIER

Overwhelmingly, the farmers said their biggest problem was understanding their workers, with 96 percent noting the language barrier. More than half also mentioned cultural concerns.

A Cornell project and a Wisconsin-based nonprofit program called Puentes, or Bridges, cater to dairy farmers, though similar cross-border programs for farmers or agricultural leaders exist in Pennsylvania and Kentucky.

Bruce Goldstein of the Washington-based Farmworker Justice Fund says the visits are fine, but the real test is whether wages and working conditions improve. The Cornell survey said the average Hispanic dairy worker gets \$7.51 an hour.

Cornell took its first group of farmers across the border last month, bouncing in vans an hour past the paved road to a central Mexican village.

"Down there, they're grinding out a living the way we used to farm in this country 70 or 80 years ago," said Thomas Maloney, the Cornell extension associate who arranged the trip. "Believe me, once you go and see it, you understand why people travel 3,000 miles for a job."

BACK IN THE U.S.

Baker returned to her farm just west of the Adirondacks with stories of Mexican cows producing just eight pounds of milk a day, compared to more than 70 pounds from her own. When she asked local students how many had relatives in the United States, more than half raised their hands.

"That was the best \$900 I could have spent for my dairy farm," Baker said. Inspired, she'll start a language course called Dairyman's Spanish in the spring.

Rosenow, of Waumandee, Wis., said he's helped place Mexicans on dozens of farms after the first one he hired worked 54 days straight, "with no complaint."

Rosenow has crossed the border three times with Puentes. He remembers visiting a former employee who had used his U.S. earnings to build a bakery. "I didn't have a clue," Rosenow said. "I thought he'd want to live here [in America] someday."

Now Rosenow asks his workers what they need to learn. He's taught a business course and a driving class, and his farm set up a banking system where workers' families in Mexico can access money with ATM cards.

"Anything I can do to make things better for my employees will make this business run better," said Rosenow, who now works about 70 hours a week instead of 90 or 95.

And after explaining to workers how higher-quality milk gets a better price, his farm makes \$1,200 to \$2,000 more a month. The money goes for bonuses on top of workers' salaries of \$375 a week.

At Baker's house, 22-year-old Gabriel Monfil Arcos and 27-year-old Juan Arcos Garcia prepare for the midday milking of more than 300 cows. Garcia says he's surprised but happy "*la patrona*" made the journey.

Downstairs, the men look through Baker's photos of Mexico. After a few minutes, she says, "Tell them I want to give them a bonus for Christmas. I've never done that before. Tell them it's because they're special."

She waits for the translation and, soon enough, she smiles.