

Rich Lee

Tender Soles Farm

Richmond, ME

I can sympathize with those farms that participate in larger commodity priced structures in that they are price takers. All farms and industries are feeling the pain of rising prices for fuel, fertilizer, transportation, materials, and housing. It is important to recognize that a lot of our current economy is propped up by subsidized fossil fuels which give the illusion that it is simple, easy, and efficient to be trucking food long and people long distances on a daily basis. A century ago, it was a luxury to travel a few towns over for a visit when travelling by animal power. I'm under no illusion that we will continue to do so at the current rate of climate change, the climbing expense of mining fossil fuels, and the environmental disruptions and subsequent unpredictable harvests we are experiencing. These are all obstacles to the viability of farms in Maine and elsewhere.

I don't have any particular answers, but I hesitate to oppose minimum wage and overtime laws because you may be a price taker. By making the choice to oppose these farmworker protections, we are absolving ourselves of fixing the larger issue of choosing to participate in systems that put us in economically vulnerable positions. I (maybe naively) believe that if blueberry producers collectively bargained with those corporations that they are taking prices from; not unlike unions collectively acting to fight for better wages and benefits, those companies would have to listen. Maine is uniquely positioned as one of the few places to be able to grow blueberries nationally to be able to make a stand in this way.

I don't believe it is fair to ag workers, who carry out the difficult work we do in all types of weather, to be squeezed out of a fair living wage. It is the people who do the harvesting, management, and processing of agricultural products who are the foundation of any agricultural business. Without farm workers, the work simply wouldn't get done. I've heard throughout these sessions that most farmers are paying minimum hourly wage or above that whether at a set hourly rate, or piece work. We pay our workers a minimum of \$15/hr and most hourly workers get paid \$16-\$17/hr depending on experience. I've read the information on the PDF regarding different scenarios of piece work on different farms. I'm curious what the average is rather than particular scenarios.

I'd like to stress that whatever it is we pay, the minimum wage and the associated overtime pay that we hopefully are also addressing for farm workers should represent the minimum one needs to be paid in order to maintain a decent standard of living in the place they live. I think it does make sense for a minor to get paid less since their cost of living is less assuming

they live with family; we do pay high school students less than an adult worker. Paying a competitive wage that one can raise a family on is a goal we particularly have. We aren't there yet, but our long term vision is that if we want to have someone help manage our farm and make it more productive, we will likely need to achieve this in one way or another. We view wages as one way to show our employees that they are valuable and foundational to our farm business. We will also hopefully retain them by paying more because the longer they work here, the more valuable they are as a worker and again we would like to reflect that in the wages they receive. At the end of the year, we as farm owners retain the value of the farm. Farmworkers walk away at the end of the year only with cash. There is a degree of uncertainty of future income that makes me feel better about pushing for farmworkers rights and not simply a way of accomplishing work. They are humans who deserve dignity and the opportunity for a stable standard of living in the place they work.

We have had a hard time finding good, skilled employees on our organic vegetable farm. A common refrain from the people we did hire this year is that housing is a major obstacle; they had a hard time finding housing in Richmond that they could afford. We have some on-farm housing available, but not enough for all the people we need to be working here. I have read that ideally a household should not be paying more than 30% of their income towards housing. For one employee we paid this year at \$17/hr at roughly 45 hrs per week, she was averaging about \$3000 a month. She had to commute 45 minutes one way from Portland from a seasonal sublet apartment because the cheapest decent housing she could find in Richmond was about \$1000/month. This is only one concrete example, but I think is indicative of what might be a fairer wage. We pay as much as we can to make things work for our employees. Our payroll this year is going to be at least double what we can actually pay ourselves from the farm. Without them we would not have had as successful a year as we have had. We think that a mandatory minimum wage for workers and overtime, which we are planning on implementing next year, will ensure that all workers can have a livable wage in Maine.

Kate Del Vecchio  
(she/ her/ hers)  
& Richard Lee  
(he/ him/ his)

Tender Soles Farm  
453 Main Street

Richmond, ME 04357  
(207) 620-0030  
(917) 887-9702

[tendersolesfarm@gmail.com](mailto:tendersolesfarm@gmail.com)  
[www.tendersolesfarm.com](http://www.tendersolesfarm.com)