

Managing Shearing Crews: Your Reputation Hinges on It

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With today's labor market, an increasing number of Christmas tree growers are hiring contract shearing crews, migrant labor, and H2-A workers to get their trees sheared. Without this extra labor, the job would not get done. While the use of contract labor has lightened the workload for many Christmas tree growers, it can also loosen growers' control of production practices. Some growers have adjusted to using a non-local and often Spanish-speaking labor force without hurting the quality of their product. Other growers struggle to adjust to a changing workforce. The difference in how well a shearing crew performs depends on how they are trained and supervised. Good labor management requires clear communication, performance standards, and individual accountability for shearing work. This must be built into the business structure.

REPUTATIONS AT RISK

There are a number of shearing problems across the region that result more from management decisions than from mistakes made by individual workers. One problem for some growers involves inadequate supervision of shearers paid by piecework. While piecework rewards the faster shearers and increases efficiency, without consistent supervision and accountability the quality of work can decline. I recently observed one worker who reportedly sheared more than 1,400 four to five foot trees in one day. He and his crew mates worked quickly, but often missed bottom branches, failed to shear the far side of some trees, and squared other trees up with 4 or 5 deep cuts rather than rounding the tree with more knife cuts. The advantage of fast shearers is lost if a second crew has to be paid to go back through and fix their mistakes.

On some farms, the supervision of shearers by crew leaders or foremen is inadequate. Some shearing crews work without any apparent supervision. If foremen congregate and work separately from their shearing crews, their expertise is limited to the trees they shear themselves. It may be more comfortable to work in small groups without the barriers of language and culture, but overall tree quality suffers from the lack of supervision. Some growers disperse foremen individually among the crews to avoid the tendency for them to work together. The most effective supervisors are free to train, watch, and instruct their crew without having to worry about their own production quota.

Some growers have struggled to determine the appropriate level of supervision needed when using contract labor crews to shear trees. Many growers maintain greater separation from contract crews than from their own employees to avoid incurring employer responsibilities as defined by tax and labor laws. While understandable, this hands-off approach relinquishes shearing decisions to the contract crew leader. The trees get sheared to the crew leader's specifications rather than those of the trees' owner. While one-on-one instruction to individual workers would violate labor contractor definitions, shearing quality can still be monitored and followed-up with detailed instructions to the crew leader.

While these problems can often be absorbed, corrected the following season, or explained away, there are still costs associated with them. Lost time, delayed inventory, and damaged reputation are but a few of these "hidden" costs. Nor can these problems be explained away by the deficiencies of the labor force. Many growers maintain their product quality and reputation while using similar labor on their farms. The difference often comes down to the level of training, supervision, and accountability provided by the grower.

TRAINING

Locating and hiring a labor force can often be so involved that the need for training is not considered until after the crew is on the job. Without a plan

for training, workers unfamiliar with Christmas trees may receive a very confusing message during initial instruction. Not only do many Hispanic migrant workers have to overcome a language barrier to understand instructions about shearing, they may not be accustomed to distinguishing the features of a Christmas tree. Some may not even know the names of tree parts in their own language, let alone English. Without clear understanding of what they should do, training reverts to negative feedback on their initial shearing efforts. Results are likely to be disappointing to the grower, but whose fault is it really?

Where growers have successfully and rapidly trained migrant labor crews to shear Christmas trees, they used approaches to overcome the language barrier, to simplify and prioritize instruction, and to provide positive as well as negative feedback. The training is backed up by vigilant and ongoing supervision to insure that one shearing concept doesn't hold sway in the shearers' actions over others to the detriment of tree quality.

Make sure that there is a way to translate instructions to workers' natural language before starting the training even if it is a matter of the trainer and foremen planning common hand signals. Use and reward bilingual skills in your own employees. While a grower may often have a bilingual employee or contract crew leader to rely on, knowing some key words in Spanish related to tree parts and shearing can streamline the feedback process and add to you or your foreman's credibility with workers. As the most common foreign language on farms, Spanish translations of common shearing terms are included in Table A.

Begin instruction away from the trees. This is a case where a picture is worth a thousand words (or arm gestures). Show new workers photos of the desired outcome, both decorated and undecorated trees, to help them to better understand your own goals for tree quality. Use simple diagrams or even sketches on a chalk board to emphasize key aspects of what they are to do. Concepts such as taper or the balance between the leader and top lateral branches lend themselves to such simplified teaching methods.

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When demonstrating basic shearing techniques in the field, simplicity is still the key. Focus on key knifework concepts such as straight and uniform taper, smoothness of cut, and depth of cut. Demonstrate both good and bad practice. If the crew will also be topping trees, discuss leader length, balance between the leader and top lateral branches, and bud selection. Work on one concept at a time. Be sure to also demonstrate safe practice and safety equipment. If you don't model it, they won't follow it.

Rather than undertaking initial training themselves, some growers have asked their County Extension Agent or another local expert to train a new crew of workers to shear. As long as individual farm shearing goals are communicated clearly, such efforts have been successful. Training is an important first step, but without ongoing supervision, individual shearing technique can stray far from the initial training objectives.

SUPERVISION

Shearing is by far the most complex procedure involved in the production of trees. Only with close supervision, can inexperienced shearers continually make good decisions across the variations in tree growth that occur across and between fields. I have heard growers complain that their workers shear trees properly as long as the grower is present, but when they leave, the quality of work goes down. While this is usually a complaint about the quality of labor, it could almost be viewed as a complement to the grower — his or her supervision makes a difference in the quality of work. There is no replacement for it.

While a small grower may have to be physically present or at least frequently checking the quality of work behind a crew, good managers of larger operations build that kind of supervision into their business structure. They hire enough foremen and train them to work closely with their crews. Good managers recognize that a migrant workforce with little experience around trees and a possible language barrier will likely require more supervision than local workers. In communicating across language and culture, supervision will require more one-on-one time to find workers doing things right or wrong.

Shortcuts in supervision incur large costs in quality.

The foreman of a shearing crew larger than two or three workers should not regularly shear. Their job is to ensure the quality of their crew's work. They trouble shoot, answer questions, hold individual workers accountable for repeated mistakes, compliment good work as it is being done, and stay with the crew continuously.

Chain of command can be important. Even if the workers are employees and not contract labor, instructions should be passed through the field supervisor and not directly to the workers. If "extra" bosses provide contradicting instructions, the authority of the foreman will be undermined. Clear communication with the foreman or contract labor crew leader is one of the most critical management activities for any grower.

Breaking down the work of shearing into different tasks is helpful. Most growers separate crews shearing go-to-market trees from crews shearing the keeper trees because of the difference in techniques. Many growers also separate working tops from shearing the sides. By separating the tasks, the complexity of shearing can be become more manageable in both training and supervision.

ACCOUNTABILITY

While training and supervision are critical to the quality of shearing, consistent results depend on holding individual shearers accountable for their work. An effective foreman will take the time to continually evaluate each worker and tell them when they are doing things right or wrong. Without such ongoing supervision or some mechanism of tracking individual performance, mistakes may continue longer than necessary. Some simple efforts can make workers more accountable for their work. For instance, by assigning a flagging tape color or combination of colors to each shearer, rows can be color-coded and identified by the worker who sheared it. Not only can supervisors evaluate individual shearers after the crew has moved ahead, but the shearers would know that they were being held to greater accountability. Appropriate training, correction, or reward can then be directed to the individual worker. While it may seem unimportant and overly detailed, individual accountability can provide control on the level at which shearing mistakes occur.

SUMMARY

The growers that achieve uniform quality shearing, have adjusted their business structure around their labor force. Successful growers actively plan to overcome problems in bilingual communication, lack of shearing experience, or workers' misconceptions from previous shearing work on other farms. To be effective, growers must link their expectations for tree shape and quality to their management of labor. Training, supervision, and accountability are the necessary tools growers can use to achieve uniform tree quality from diverse shearing crews.



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TABLE A: Useful Spanish Words for Shearing

tree - arboles (arbo-lez)	clippers - tijeras (tee-heras)
pine, fir, spruce - pinos (pie-nos)	cut - cortar
bud - un pinpollo (pinpo-yo) del arboles	too long - muy largo
branch - rama	too short - muy corto
leader or top - punta de los pinos	too wide - muy ancho
stem or trunk - tronco de los arboles	too narrow - muy angosto
taper - los angulos de los pinos	straight - derecho
cone - cono	crooked - torcido
horn - una rama que tiene punta	angled - angulo
(a branch that turns like a top)	round - redondo
cross-over - una rama que ha crecido de un lado	square - cuadrado (quad-rado)
little bud - un pinpollo chico	beautiful / good - muy bueno, muy bien
big bud - un pinpollo grande	ugly / bad - muy feo
too many tops - muchas puntas	bad job - untrabajo (untrabaho) malo
knife - cuchillo (cuchee-yo) or machete	market tree - los arboles los que (kay) van al mercado
knife sharpener - filar (fee-lar)	keeper tree - los arboles que se quedan (kay-dan)
sharpen knife - a filen los cuchillo	
clean knife - limpiar los cuchillo	