



# The Angus Link

by **TY GROSHANS**, director of commercial programs, American Angus Association

## Labor crisis in production agriculture?

The agricultural industry is based on family values, hard work, integrity, honesty, a handshake and your word. But, how many times have you heard someone say, "Good help is hard to find"? Good employees have long been in high demand in agriculture.

But what makes a good employee? Is it someone who shows up to work on time every day? Or is it the person who is the first there and the last to leave? Everyone has different expectations of what qualities make a good employee.

In a recent American Angus Association report, "Priorities First: Identifying Management Priorities in the Commercial Cow-Calf Business," labor management was ranked as the eighth-highest priority among successful commercial cattle producers.

Both hired and family labor ranked as equally important components, emphasizing the management and retention of labor to an operation. The report revealed that producers prioritize labor according to the size of their herds. Larger herds place greater management

emphasis on labor than smaller herds.

"Labor is a critical challenge for family ranchers, and now we have a catch-22 situation," says Harlan Hughes, livestock economist in Laramie, Wyo. "Management generally has to come from the same person providing much of the labor needed in the operation. As labor demands go up, time allocated toward managing the business goes down. Sometimes all that's left is management by crisis. This problem must be remedied, because good management is what ensures the financial well-being of the ranch family long term."

Cattle operations have long been considered multi-generational endeavors, handed down from generation to generation. Although with fewer young people returning to the family ranch, this raises concerns for the future of agriculture.

The average age of producers has been increasing every year since the 1974 Census of Agriculture. According to the 2002 Census of Agriculture, the

average age of a farmer is 55.3 years. A recent (2005) survey conducted by the Iowa Beef Center found that the average age of beef producers in that state is 52, with 53% of beef producers being between the ages of 45 and 65.

With so many producers close to retirement age, who will take over the leadership of this great beef industry?

Recently the American Angus Association sponsored a conference in Kansas City, Mo., that addressed that question and other labor challenges for agriculture. "Employee Management for Production Agriculture" was a conference designed for all agricultural managers, from mid-level or unit managers to human resource personnel and family farmers/ranchers. Attendees heard from a variety of speakers with a professional emphasis on managing people.

In the beef breakout session, attendees discussed the labor concerns that pertained to their operations. The question that seemed to be most common was, "Where do you find good employees?" Many avenues were being

used, such as local newspapers, regional publications, the Internet and word of mouth.

So what is the solution for the labor crisis in production agriculture? I encourage you to attend conferences that focus on management issues and to build relationships, be involved and support the community in which you live. Every situation will be different, but the genuine care that you express as an employer/manager to your employees or to other family members in your operation will sustain good working relationships.

Is the next generation going to be able to continue the legacy of leadership to sustain a vibrant beef industry? Yes! I believe that the young individuals in agriculture are up to the challenge.

To receive additional copies of "Priorities First" or to provide comments, contact Ty Groshans, director of commercial programs, at 816-383-5193 or e-mail [tgroshans@angus.org](mailto:tgroshans@angus.org).

