

An Astounding H-2A Success Story

Angelica Nurseries Inc. is a 2,100-acre nursery in Kennedyville, Md., which employs many migrant workers during the peak season, some of them H-2A laborers. In 1956, the Kohl family purchased a 300-acre farm they call Angelica Nurseries, relocating to the Eastern Shore in 1957 and the nursery was incorporated in 1963. The company had been started by Thomas J. Kohl, Jr. in the 1930's as a landscape business, before going into the nursery business.

Three members of the Kohl family run the business: Tim Kohl concentrates on developing a broad selection of outstanding nursery stock for the landscape and nursery wholesale trade, Bernard focuses on equipment, maintenance and logistics and brother Verne's role is general manager and customer relations. Over the years, Angelica has established a loyal following of discerning professionals who have come to expect top quality product and exceptional service.

I first read an article about the nursery from a 2001 post at a website.

It mentioned that the firm hired H-2A workers, but then went further...much further. "Recruiting isn't a concern for us," said LeVerne C. Kohl, son of founder Thomas J. Kohl Jr. "Treat people right, show them consideration while they're here and pay them well and you don't have to recruit. They'll all want to return."¹

"In 2000," the article continued, "Angelica had no new employees. Each migrant employed last year returned from 1999. This saved the company from having to retrain and, Kohl believes, increased the company's efficiency and productivity."²

As I read on, I found out *why* the migrants returned. The nursery owners provide excellent housing and other frills for them. As a matter of fact, the Maryland Job Service has recognized Angelica for programs such as health insurance and other benefits. In 2001, they had two facilities: One a dormitory and the other a 17-unit development for families. Some migrants have lived on the premises for the entire 12 years of the nurseries existence on the present site. The houses are 1,400 square feet and include all the amenities, and the dorms house 150 workers. The housing is properly managed, taken good care of and inspected regularly.

In addition, that year a cafeteria provided a rotating staff of four cooks. Angelica Nurseries has adjusted its benefits program to accommodate those applicants from the H-2A program as well. The Kohl family restructured the benefits of pension, profit sharing and insurance, as H-2A did not recognize those in that year. Instead, they opted for increased pay.

Another search on Angelica Nurseries brought up the Commission minutes of the Oct. 6, 2005 Kent County Maryland Planning and Zoning Board Meeting, in which the company was still at it—adding two more 1,500 square foot houses for migrant workers to their existing housing development and making other improvements to the property.

Finally, a third search once more turned up Angelica Nurseries in a 2006 posting at AmericanFarm.com. This time Bernie Kohl, who is in charge of customer service for the company was speaking of the H-2A program and migrant labor in general and how his company utilizes it.

“If AgJOBS would go through, we’d be happy,” he said... ‘We use H-2A. In the spring, we have about 130 H-2A workers. There is no quota, no cap. The biggest problem with the current H-2A program and with people using it, is the wage rate and the way they come up with that. It’s spiraling upward, out of control, so it becomes unaffordable to stay in the program.’”³

Then there is the contract clause:

“The problem is, domestic workers can continue to come here up to the time the contract is half over.”⁴ That means a lot of flux, as either the nursery has to put up the late arrivals or even send back the Mexicans who came to help out earlier that year.

However, with mandatory electronic verification of authorization to work in this country, the H-2A workers are *preferred* over regular migrants. As Kohl says, “The year before we went with H-2A, we had such a problem with that (electronic verification) to keep a workforce of 120 workers, we processed from March to the end of June, 800 workers. We’d hire, then find out they were not authorized to work. We get notified they’re not legal. If they don’t act and we continue to employ, then we’re in violation. They had 30 days to correct (their legal status), so they’d leave on the 28th day. That forced us into H-2A.”⁵

Kohl sees the answer to the whole migrant labor question as, “...a system that uses prevailing wage rate and a streamlined application process. Under the current system, he said, the same people can come back. ‘When we train them, we like to see them return.’”⁶

But, one way or the other, the Kohl family and Angelica Nurseries, Inc. will prosper.

¹Todd Davis, “Maintain a Happy Work Force,” www.Greenbeam.com, © 2001 Branch-Smith Publishing, <http://www.greenbeam.com/features/tour022601.stm>. (accessed 10-29-07)

²Davis, Ibid.

³Carol Kinsley, “Nurseryman: Immigration reform overdue,” 3-1-2006, www.americanfarm.com, <http://www.americanfarm.com/growtopstory3.01.2006b.html>. (accessed 10-29-2007)

⁴Carol Kinsley, Ibid.

⁵Carol Kinsley, Ibid.

⁶Carol Kinsley, Ibid.