

HIRE INTERNS SAFELY AND LEGALLY

Pilot project accepting enrollment; supports interns to safely work on small farms

Ethan Schaffer, Seattle

Need an extra hand on your farm this season? The Washington State Farm Internship Project is enrolling additional farms in select counties. In 2014, legislature established the pilot project to allow interns to safely work on small farms to learn about farming practices. A group of farmers and farm advocates like Tilth Producers (and myself) worked with Washington State Senator Kevin Ranker to develop the program. This season, 14 farms in eight counties participated. Participating farms have hosted a total of 25 interns since 2014.

Tilth Producers member Rawley Johnson of Early Bird Farm in Tacoma, WA, participated in the program this season. “My intern was indispensable. She helped me do more and grow my farm,” Rawley stated in an interview. “Labor & Industries made it really easy to apply. It’s a simple, one page application.”



Rawley Johnson of Early Bird Farm, Tacoma, WA, benefited greatly from the Farm Internship Project, with intern Rebecca Cooley (pictured above).

It’s hard to overstate the important role farm internships have had in fueling the new movement of young farmers. I know because in 2001 I created one of the largest black markets for farm interns, GrowFood.org. The program closed in 2014 but at its peak listed more than 2,600 farms in 57 countries and counted upwards of 30,000 interns working on farms. When I speak at farm conferences, I often start by asking how many new farmers got started with a farm internship. Typically, more than half raise their hands.

Despite internships being such an effective tool for training the next generation of farmers, there is one small problem. Most farm internships are illegal. It is illegal for for-profit farms to accept volunteer labor. This is considered a violation of minimum wage laws. If a farm intern isn’t paid, then the farm isn’t paying into worker’s compensation, which is another violation. Even worse, it leaves both the farm and intern open for liability. If the intern were to get injured, the farm could be liable for the medical bills or the intern would be left to pay out of pocket.

If you would like to accept interns on your farm, contact Kelly Kane, Kelly.Kane@lni.wa.gov, 509-324-2663 or 1-800-509-8847 or visit bit.ly/farminternproject

Once you are enrolled in the program, you can advertise your internship through Tilth Producers and through services like Good Food Jobs, ATTRA and WWOOF USA.

The Farm Internship Project resolves these issues. Farms who enroll in the program may hire up to three interns who are exempt from minimum wage rules. The farm pays a reduced rate into the State worker’s compensation fund, which can be as low as \$.50 per hour. If an intern is injured, the State workers compensation fund pays the bills and the farm is not liable. It’s a small price to insure intern safety.

“That’s the best part about the program. Interns get workers compensation coverage. I know interns who have been injured and farmers who have been fined,” Rawley explained.

To be eligible to participate, farms must have annual gross sales under \$250,000 and be located in one of the following participating counties: Chelan, Grant, Island, Jefferson, King, Kitsap, Kittitas, Lincoln, Pierce, San Juan, Skagit, Snohomish, Spokane, Thurston, Whatcom, and Yakima. The internship must be educational in nature and follow a curriculum. The intern cannot displace an experienced worker. The farm must complete a written farm internship agreement with the intern, which is great practice regardless.

“L&I is flexible with the curriculum and has templates you can use,” Johnson explained. “I made a simple outline that emphasized what the intern would learn from working on my farm. I made a list of books that I’ve found useful and already own.”

The three-year pilot project ends December 31, 2017. If the program gains enough participation, the legislature will consider making it permanent and open to all counties.

“I absolutely encourage farms to sign up,” Rawley concluded.

Founder of GrowFood.org and Viva Farms, Ethan Schaffer is currently board secretary at the Washington Sustainable Food and Farming Network.

More Information

Washington Small Farm Internship Project: www.lni.wa.gov/WorkplaceRights/agriculture/smallfarminternship/default.asp

Full Bill Language: lawfilesexternal.wa.gov/biennium/2013-14/Pdf/Bills/Senate%20Passed%20Legislature/5123-S.PL.pdf

Senator Ranker’s Facebook Page: www.facebook.com/Kevin-Ranker-12170186133/?fref=ts

