



# Improved Safety, Morale Are No Accidents

FARM EMPLOYERS LABOR SERVICE PROVIDES TRAINING THAT GETS RESULTS  
BY CHRIS J. PARKER

It had been awhile since Leavens Ranches had hosted a safety meeting for its employees and Leslie Leavens-Crowe was feeling a bit, well, unsafe.

Leavens-Crowe, partner and office manager at Santa Paula-based Leavens Ranches, knew there were new government safety regulations that needed to be discussed. As any California employer knows full well, there are always new state and federal regulations being released. And she knew the ranch's employees needed a safety refresher course, even though there hadn't been any accidents in recent memory.

Leavens Ranches turned to an outside source to help it meet its safety requirements: the Farm Employers Labor Service, a division of the California Farm Bureau. Officials with FELS reviewed all of Leavens Ranches' safety record-keeping and training procedures, along with other human resources issues. FELS came back with recommendations for changes in two areas: update procedures to comply with the new workplace-safety laws and begin a series of quarterly training seminars for the staff.

"There's enough additional bureaucratic nonsense that we have to keep up with," says Leavens-Crowe, whose family-owned operation currently raises lemons and avocados on 1,000 acres combined in Ventura and Monterey counties. "It's such a relief to know... we don't have to be the HR and safety experts."

FELS has been assisting growers and ranchers in Ventura County and California for about 30 years. It provides its clients with three unique services -- human resources support, safety/workers compensation management and labor relations -- and has an excellent track record of helping farms reduce costs and boost productivity.

"What we offer is kind of an all-encompassing program," says Ernie J. Garcia, the lead FELS consultant for Ventura County and the Central Coast. "It's more than just safety training."

And yet, FELS is still relatively unknown. That's why Garcia and other representatives of the employer-assistance organization are increasing their presence through the state's farm bureaus.

"FELS is a great service that more people should use," says Ed Terry, president of the Ventura County Farm Bureau. Terry has used FELS at his own Terry Farms, a 1,200-acre operation that grows strawberries, celery and bell peppers.

FELS' primary service is safety management. When a farm hires FELS, a consultant like Garcia will do a safety audit of the operation, evaluating what areas are deficient and what improvements need to be made. The consultant will also do a loss analysis to determine what safety-related expenses the farm paid out in recent years and how those expenses can be reduced in the future.

The loss analysis is especially crucial for farms that face skyrocketing workers compensation premiums.

"If you can improve your loss control it pays big dividends," says Garcia. "You can significantly reduce your workers comp premiums." Which is why safety analysis is such a big part of FELS' work. "In the past, workers comp was just a part of doing business," says Garcia. "But now that the rates have gone haywire, farms are looking to cut costs to be competitive and, in some cases, to remain in business."

Garcia says even a grower

with a \$250,000 workers comp premium can reduce the cost by 50 percent in three years. But it takes three years before the savings start since premiums are based on a farm's three-year history.

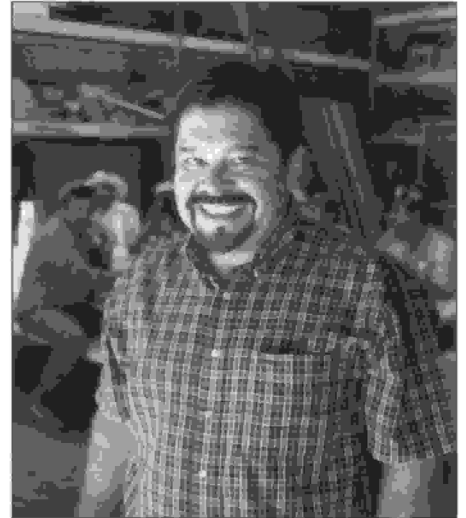
"The (cost of FELS) is minimal but most farmers are not ready to invest in it," Garcia concedes. "It's hard for them to invest in something they can't see for three years."

After the safety audit, it's up to farm management to make the recommended changes. FELS officials won't put up safety signs, for example, farm management needs to do it. But FELS will provide quarterly safety training for its clients, or for a group of clients who pool their resources.

Terry points to FELS as one of the advantages of membership in the Ventura County Farm Bureau. Not only do Ventura County Farm Bureau members get a discounted rate on the FELS fees, but members can use the bureau's boardroom for its meetings. In addition, the local Farm Bureau has rented out the Santa Paula Community Center for safety training for three or four farming companies and their workers.

Terry says the flurry of government regulations are "like a sandstorm."

"What FELS has to offer that the others don't is regular training and a great database of



FELS trainer Ernie Garcia at Leavens Ranches in Moorpark

safety management and regulations," Terry says. "They can do everything from soup to nuts and are one of the few companies that will do everything you need without charging an arm and a leg for it."

FELS is well known for its expertise in human resources and safety management but it's from personnel management that it's getting the most increased business. FELS works with farm owners to reach out to their workers, resolving potential problems before they fester into open conflict.

"A lot of growers ask, 'What's the silver bullet to counter unions?' " Garcia says. "It's really your labor relations. Are you being honest and fair? How good is the relationship with your labor force?"

Farm owner/operators like Terry and Leavens-Crowe say they have reaped the benefits of FELS' consulting. The cost -- a few thousand dollars depending upon the level or service -- is recouped in fewer accidents, lower workers comp premiums and better employee relations.

"We're so busy farming," says Leavens-Crowe, "FELS has really given us peace of mind."