

A helping hand

Peak Season Labor brings workers to farms, ranches



Diane Thibeault, right, and Ruth Boedecker operate Peak Season Labor from Lewistown. Diane and her husband Mark started the company to help farmers and ranchers find reliable help.

Photo by Charlie Denison

By CHARLIE DENISON
Senior Reporter

Twelve years ago, after selling their advertising business in Bozeman, Diane Thibeault and her husband, Mark, were ready for a change. They took a job south of Ennis assisting with Sun West Ranch.

"There was a sheepherder there from Peru, working with 1,600 sheep," Diane said. "We took him under our wing. He asked me for help finding another job, then his brother needed a job and his brother-in-law needed a job. I started calling ranchers and calling every place I could think of to help them. Then one day I just said, 'screw it. I'm just going to do it.'"

Diane was soon turning her idea of helping workers find employment into a new career.

"I didn't even really think of it as starting a business early on, I was just following my heart," she said.

Right away, Diane was busy, as she found herself placing foreign and native-born workers at U.S. farms and

ranches. Before she knew it, Peak Season Labor was born, an enterprise that works with the Department of Labor and United States Citizenship and Immigration Services to attain temporary seasonal H-2A workers.

Currently, Diane places workers in 12 states around the West, including Montana. Workers primarily come from Mexico, Peru, New Zealand and South Africa.

"South African workers are becoming more common because they speak English," Diane said.

How does it work?

Peak Season Labor consists of two parts, Diane explained, as they do the paperwork required to get the workers to their employers and also handle the recruiting aspect.

At this time, PSL has approximately 150 clients, a number that continues to rise. This being the case, Diane relies on help from partners Naomi Leifson and Ruth Boedecker.

"Naomi is an instrumental person on our team, handling much of the work involving the Department of Labor," Diane said.

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A Peruvian shepherdder works on the Sun West Ranch south of Ennis, where Diane and Mark came up with the concept of Peak Season Labor.

Photo courtesy of Diane Thibeault

"We met when she was working for the Job Service in Polson. She was going to send someone over for me to interview, and I told her, 'really, I need someone who can speak Spanish,' and she said, 'I can speak Spanish.' She quit her job the next day and has been with us ever since."

Boedecker, a longtime family friend of the Thibeaults, primarily handles the Homeland Security particulars. She started working for PSL two years ago and has enjoyed the new challenge.

"I was ready for a change and kept squawking in Diane's ear about it," she said, laughing. "That's how I got here."

Boedecker said she couldn't be happier with the new position, as she admires what Diane does and is honored to be part of the team.

"I think Diane has set a standard for going above and beyond to take care of her clients," she said.

This standard emphasizes recruiting, as Diane is a certified recruiter through the Department of Labor. She takes a lot of pleasure in traveling and is amazed by the interest expressed

in PSL when she's abroad.

"When I go to Mexico and Peru about everybody wants to come here," she said. "One time I was at a wedding in Peru and guys were lining up to talk to me."

Mark is amazed by how warmly Peru has received Diane and PSL.

"The American consulate in Peru ended up bringing Diane in to sit and talk with their board, and, since then, Diane has established a heck of a relationship with those people," he said.

"What surprised me was the consulate told me I was the first agent to come see them," Diane added.

Despite the success, Diane said there are still many challenges when it comes to recruiting, communication being at the forefront.

"So many of the workers are Spanish-speakers and I have to use a translator," she said. "Fortunately, Naomi speaks fluent Spanish and we have a gentleman in Miles City who also speaks fluent Spanish and conducts many of the interviews."

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A juggling act

One of the hardest things about the job, Boedecker said, is having “so many balls in the air.”

“There is a certain point in the process where you have a five-day response period and if you don’t

have your ducks in a row it gets to be a little hairy,” she explained.

There is much attention paid to matching workers and employers. This is done with much consideration and with respect to American applicants, as U.S. residents

are top priority for available jobs.

“This is not a program to take jobs away from U.S. workers,” Boedecker said. “We are very much pro hiring U.S. workers,” Diane added, “but in these 12 states we serve we here the same

thing: that they cannot find reliable help.”

This is particularly the case in the Hi-Line and in eastern Montana, where many potential workers are taking jobs in the oil industry.

Why the shortage?

According to Mark, “Farmers and ranchers are sending their kids off to educate them and not a lot of them are returning.”

Furthermore, as farm and ranch properties expand, they are “harder and harder to operate,” and machines can’t do it all.

The Thibeaults and others affiliated with PSL take pride in their work and enjoy working hands-on with the employers and the workers every step of the way.

“We care about the employers and we care about the workers,” Diane said. “Some of the workers have even become like family.”

PSL hires shepherders, livestock workers, irrigators, farm equipment operators and nursery workers. Workers can stay and work as long as their visas allow, which is mainly late winter through late fall, except shepherders, who come for three years. The application process takes up to three months before workers are on the ground. Interested employers are encouraged to plan ahead.

Diane anticipates continued growth, as the need for more workers continues to increase. She plans to keep going with PSL as long as the need is there, and as long as she continues to enjoy it.

For more information, go to www.peakseasonlabor.com.



Naomi Leifson of Polson is an instrumental member of the Peak Season Labor team.

Photo courtesy of Diane Thibeault

Editor's note: This story is reprinted by permission from the Montana Electric Cooperatives Association Magazine, "Rural Montana," March 2020.