SUMMARY OF A WORKSHOP ON MANAGING NURSERY LABOR DURING LIFTING AND PACKING

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Abstract.--Three nursery managers presented brief descriptions of quite different methods of managing their temporary labor forces during lifting and packing. The audience discussed the ideas presented and other aspects of labor management and accountability. The variety of systems used for lifting and packing have a marked influence on the labor management styles of nursery managers.

INTRODUCTION

Two concurrent workshops were held at the Western Session of the Southern Nursery Conference to discuss management and accountability of temporary nursery labor during lifting and packing. The discussion was lead by 3 nursery managers: Chuck Gramling of the USDA Forest Service's W. W. Ashe Nursery in Brooklyn, Mississippi; Floyd Hickam of the Arkansas Forestry Commission's Baucum Nursery near North Little Rock; and Tony Simms of the Louisiana Office of Forestry's Columbia Nursery near Columbia. The objective of the workshops was to generate audience participation and interaction in a discussion about labor management at various nurseries.

PANEL DISCUSSION

At the Ashe Nursery, Chuck Gramling instituted a system of work standards and individual accountability for all workers on the grading and packing lines. Seedlings are culled to minimum standards and each grader is expected to accurately grade 200 seedlings each 5 minutes. The graders place a ticket on each batch of seedlings they pass down the table and a supervisor records each employee's production. The batches are also sampled randomly for accuracy of culling. The slurry sprayers initial each bag before it is strapped closed. For the 1981-82 season, 1.2 million seedlings could be packed on a good day while running 3 lines with about 10 graders each.

At the Baucum Nursery the packing shed is organized in stations. At each station the packer sprays clay slurry over a half barrel covered with expanded metal then packs the seedlings in a bag suspended from a scale. The bags are numbered by station for accountability. Two lines are set up with 4 such stations along a variable speed grading table controlled by the fastest packer. The best packers can process 200 bags per day. Last season up to 1 million seedlings were packed per day with 8 packers. Custom grading

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requires additional people at the end of the table before the packing stations. The lifting crews are considered as work units rather than individuals. A total of 38 to 44 employees are used for lifting and packing.

The Columbia Nursery switched from shed packing to field packing for the 1981-82 season. Tony Simms has a paper elsewhere in these proceedings describing their field packing methods. At this workshop, however, he remarked that one of the unexpected benefits of field packing was reduced labor problems. Field packing not only lowered the required number of employees by nearly one half, it reduced dissention between inside and outside crews. All employees felt more a part of the team.

GROUP DISCUSSION

The workshops did generate some good discussion. An industry nursery manager talked about the value of developing a loyal and dependable work force by keeping fewer employees more of the year. The benefits of incentive pay and other kinds of rewards were debated. A philosophy of good communications and fair treatment of temporary labor came out as the most important factor in maintaining high employee morale and productivity. The problem women supervisors face with both male and female employees was also discussed.

Availability of labor and following traditional methods are important factors in determining what systems are used for lifting and packing, and therefore how crews are supervised. A method of evaluating the packing operation was suggested by one of the nursery managers in the audience. He said the ratio of packers to support workers; including supervisors, counters, strappers, forklift operators, and others, could be used as a measure of efficiency. The ratio will vary with the number of species and seedlots processed, the number of operations performed and other factors. However, the lower the ratio required to do the job, the greater the efficiency of operation.