

Another Voice / *State finances*

Lowering overtime threshold would harm N.Y. farms

By MAUREEN TORREY

“Essential worker” took on a new meaning last year. Farmers and farm workers have been recognized for their role in getting fresh food from the fields and milk parlors to our food pantries and grocery stores.

Labor is everything. And yet, it’s difficult to find.

Cornell Workforce Specialist Richard Stup discussed labor at the 2021 Agricultural Food & Business Outlook Conference, explaining how “long-term demographic trends have made it more challenging for farms to find workers.”

On our 12th generation Western New York farm, we’re blessed to have hardworking employees who’ve been

with us five, 10, and in some cases more than 20 years. H2A employees come back to our farm year after year and recommend us to family and friends.

Employees have joined our team from surrounding communities, and from out of the country. We work side-by-side and collaborate every day.

In order to retain their talent, hourly workers are paid above minimum wage. It’s too competitive not to. In addition to rent-free housing, utilities and transportation – on top of wages and day care, we offer health insurance, 401(k) accounts, paid vacation and sick time. We also offer bonuses and holiday meals.

After witnessing our food supply chain be upended by the pandemic, we understand just how important our es-

sential workers are – including those in agriculture.

And so, I encourage our elected officials and neighbors to visit local farms, speak with farm families and employees, and hear for themselves the love and pride for farming that these essential workers have.

And when the Farm Labor Wage Board reconvenes this fall, they must consider how agriculture differs from other industries – and everything our family farms have endured the last few years. Rising costs of labor, no option to pass costs on to consumers, some of the most challenging weather we’ve experienced in recent memory, and a competitive global marketplace.

When battling weather, you put in the work when Mother Nature allows.

which could mean three hours one day, and 12 the next. And we’re “price takers” – with no control over the price of milk. We never know exactly how we’re being compensated for milk leaving our farm until we receive the check.

Now is not the time to lower the overtime threshold.

Our employees want to stay in New York, and we’re doing everything we can to give them the hours they want so we retain them on our team.

Don’t give our employees a reason to take their talents elsewhere and leave New York State.

Maureen Torrey is partner of Torrey Farms in Elba, Genesee County, and a member of the Northeast Dairy Producers Association.