

Program Trains Refugees For Work on NY Dairy Farms

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In a Aug. 5, 2014 photo, Bhutanese refugee Chandra Pradhan prepares cows to be milked at Noblehurst Farm, as farm director Sarah Noble-Moag looks on. Pradhan is among the first participants in a pilot program aimed at training resettled refugees to work on New York's dairy farms instead of the more usual placements in factories and hotels. (AP Photo/Carolyn Thompson)

ROCHESTER, N.Y. (AP) — Every morning, a handful of Bhutanese refugees who have settled in city neighborhoods board a van that takes them past bustling streets and suburbs and into a rural landscape where cows outnumber people.

In a setting much closer to the homeland they left behind, the refugees train to work on dairy farms, part of a pilot program that seeks to find work for the new arrivals while addressing the demand for milk driven by the state's booming yogurt industry.

"It's kind of an ideal situation," said Jorge Montalvo, director of the state's Office for New Americans. "The dairy industry needed more skilled workers ... and you have folks who have some of these skills and are interested in doing it and you put them together."

Idaho, Oregon and Arizona also have experimented with placing refugees on dairy farms in an effort to satisfy both the interests of the immigrants and the needs of their adopted states.

Over the past 10 years, the U.S. has taken in more than 50,000 Nepali-speaking Bhutanese who either fled or were forced out in the 1980s and 1990s as the government sought to impose a single national culture and language and restrict

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citizenship.

Such cities as Buffalo, Baltimore and Milwaukee have invited the immigrants to repopulate dwindling neighborhoods and provide an urban workforce. Rochester alone is home to 5,300, many who find work in factories and hotels.

Only nine are involved so far in the dairy program — funded by \$85,000 in grants from the Genesee Regional Market Authority — but the goal is to replicate the model statewide and have several hundred refugees from Bhutan and elsewhere working and resettling in farm country.

New York's dairy industry, the third largest in the nation, produced an estimated 740 million pounds of yogurt in 2013, more than triple than in 2007, according to the New York Farm Bureau, and farms struggle to fill jobs created by the new demand. Dairy processing jobs have increased by more than 13 percent over the past five years, according to Cornell University.

On a recent morning in the Wyoming County town of Linwood, about a half-hour's drive south of Rochester, about 50 cows lumbered onto a rotating platform at Noblehurst Farm, and Chandra Pradhan deftly prepared each for milking by automated machines.

"It is very peaceful," said the soft-spoken newcomer, who worked previously in housekeeping at the Hyatt Hotel in Rochester.

Like many of the refugees who arrive here, Pradhan milked and handled cows on farms in Bhutan, so there was an immediate comfort level in farm country.

Though none had experience with a commercial setting's automation, Pradhan and the others picked up enough in a three-week training course to keep pace with the local and Mexican workers alongside them during 12-hour shifts.

"It's very challenging to find folks who are interested in that work," said Sarah Noble-Moag, director of the seven-generation Noblehurst Farm. "It's hard work. It's with animals. It's not the cleanest of environments."

The New York program, a collaboration of Cornell Cooperative Extension, Community Action Angels and Alfred University, began with the hiring of 39-year-old Manoj Rai, who was raised on a grain farm in Bhutan and acted as a liaison between the refugees and administrators.

"For me, I love living in the countryside rather than being in the cities," Rai said. "Most of our people, where we were brought up, we were farmers and we still love to be on the farms."

Among the hurdles in the program will be overcoming the rural areas' lack of public transportation that many now rely on for shopping and health care. Only one of the refugees has a car and just two have driver's licenses.

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While the trainees struggled at first to learn the milking technology, especially with limited English, Rai said all intend to stick with their new profession.

"They tell me things are getting easier day by day," he said.

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