Detasseling: Providing Summer Work for Thousands of Young Nebraskans

You may not know what it is, or why it's done, but you most likely have heard about it. It is detasseling, and it's a process used by seed corn companies to produce high-quality products for their customers.

In the very simplest of terms, detasseling involves removing the tassel at the very top of the corn plant, mechanically and by hand, to prevent unwanted pollination. This results in the plant producing pure hybrid seeds (see sidebar for more details on detasseling).

For decades, detasseling work has supplied high-paying summer jobs for thousands of Nebraskans, primarily youth 18 and under.

"We hire around 1,300 to 1,800 workers each summer, depending on the number of acres we contract," said Julie Bohlen, one of three owners of **S&J Detasseling** based in **Glenvil**, near Hastings. "We estimate almost 80 percent of those workers are under 18 years old."

S&J is just one of several contractors in the state that provides the labor force needed to detassel hundreds of thousands of acres of seed corn of the top-selling brands in the nation.

The fieldwork is not always easy, and is many times conducted in the dog days of summer in very humid conditions. But the benefits are well worth it, especially for teens needing employment during the short time they are out of school.

The What, Why and How of Detasseling

What: The tassel, located at the very top of the corn plant, contains the pollen that allows the corn plants to reproduce.

Why: The ultimate purpose for detasseling is to produce a final seed product with specific traits that can be marketed by the seed corn companies. The hybridization process basically involves taking the best traits from one corn variety and cross-breeding with another variety to get the best of both varieties.

As the season begins, the two inbreds are typically planted alternating four female rows and one male row. Once the plants reach a certain stage, and prior to pollination, it's time for detasseling.

The tassels are removed both mechanically and by hand from one of the varieties of corn plants. That way, when pollination does occur, the detasseled plants don't self-pollinate and are receiving only the desired traits of the other planted variety. Just prior to harvest, the rows of corn that were not detassled are destroyed, so only hybrid seed is collected.

How: The first step involves using GPS-driven machines that make the initial pass across the field. A "cutter" chops the tops of the corn, the "puller" uses two rollers to remove the tassel. However, because the stalks are variable heights, machines only clear between 60 to 90 percent of the tassels.

That's when the first set of workers begin their walk through the fields to start pulling all the missed tassels they can find. Companies such as Corteva, may also use a tractor-like machine that carries the workers in baskets across the field.

But even the best detasselers can have misses. Sometimes workers walk the fields two or three times to catch all the misses.

The extreme detail that companies take to ensure all the undesired tassels are removed gives their farmer-customers confidence they are buying the purest hybrid seed possible.

Julie Bohlen

"Money is the number one reason teens detassel," said Bohlen. "It's a great opportunity to earn good money in a short period of time so they can do other things as well during the summer. And for a lot of these teens it's a chance to work with friends or siblings."

Those reasons certainly hold true for the three Collazo brothers, who live just outside of **Marquette**.

Titan, the oldest of the trio and recent Aurora High School graduate, is detasseling for his seventh summer. Why does he keep coming back?

"I get paid more each year and it's a fun environment, especially when you get to do it with your friends, and this is the last summer I get to hang out with them before I head to college," said Titan.

The detasseling season typically runs two to three and a half weeks with field workers making $9 to $18 per hour. If they put in the time, detasslers can make anywhere from $600 to $3,000 per summer.

A three-sport athlete for Aurora, Titan said the short-working season has also been important for him because he still has been able to attend several sports camps in the summer. He added

that being able to play chauffeur for his brothers, Carlos, 14, and Cameron, 13, is convenient for his family.

The Collazos, whose mother detasseled, is a fairly typical multi-generational detasseling family.

"We did a straw poll on our buses, and we figured a little less than half of our current crew members have parents who detasseled," said Bohlen.

She also said they have a high retention rate among field workers, estimating that those who complete the first season, average three years working with them.

S&J employs workers from 50 different communities in an 80-mile radius that covers parts of southeast and south central Nebraska. The student workers come from schools that cover the gambit both large and small, from Class A to Class D-2.

Students aren't the only ones who benefit from summer employment from S&J.

"Besides hiring detasselers, we hire bus drivers, carrier drivers, supervisors, assistant supervisors, office staff and area people," said Bohlen. "Many of these workers are professionals and para-professionals from the surrounding school systems. Some of them have worked for us for over 20 summers."

The Collazo brothers, from left: Cameron, Titan and Carlos.

Economic Impact

Although the number fluctuates from season to season, it's estimated that anywhere from 200,000 to 300,000 acres of seed corn are planted in Nebraska each year.

That means millions of dollars are pumped into the state's economy due to the detasseling process alone.

Corteva Agriscience, which recently became the parent company of several well-known seed corn brands including Pioneer, Mycogen Seeds and Hoegemeyer, is among those companies contributing to the economic impact brought about by detasseling.

"What it does here in Nebraska is provide a lot of workers a meaningful, hopefully fun, work experience," said Corteva Location Plant Manager Kirk Palmer. "In many cases for our young detasselers, it's their first true paid work experience."

Palmer said that bankers at several local communities have commented that they can always tell when the first paychecks come out because many of the youngsters come in to open their first checking or savings account.

"It has a huge impact on our local communities," said Palmer. "A big chunk of that money goes to local retailers for school clothing and supplies, cell phones and even school cars."

The detasseling investment made by seed corn companies goes beyond just hiring the field workers. It includes purchases from area vendors that range from supplies, safety equipment, fuel and vehicles.

Kirk Palmer

"Our company is committed to safety, and we take that commitment very seriously," said Palmer, who has been employed in the seed corn industry for 28 years. "We spend a lot of time on worker protection, heat preparedness, having the correct emergency preparedness in place and knowing where each worker is located in the field."

Corteva positions itself as a community-based company committed to hiring local residents for summer employment where it is able to do so.

"Our partnership with the community is an important part of what makes us successful as a business and allows us to offer very good hybrid genetics to our customers," said Palmer. "The hard work of our local teams plays a huge role in this."

Detasseling has also provided a bridge for many young Nebraskans who knew little about agriculture prior to their summer employment. It has opened the door to possible future employment in the industry.

"We've seen some of our workers stay with us for several years, go on to college and then come back and intern with us," said Palmer. "As a company, we see it as one way to recruit employees in the future."

He added that with Nebraska's low unemployment rate, it is important to develop a network of potential employees, and detasseling has aided in that effort.

While the basic process of detasseling remains the same, Palmer points out that the current generation doesn't want to hear for the hundredth time, "Back in my day, we had to pull each and every tassel out by hand and it was so hot...."

Detasseling has been and is expected to continue to be a sort of right of passage for many Nebraskans. It continues to offer summer employment opportunities that are not otherwise always available.

A Day in the Life

To see a video of a day in the life of a detassler, visit sjdetasseling.com.