

# Value of migrant workers begins to sink in

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## Value of Migrant Workers Begins to Sink in

Without housing, they won't be there to pick crops, boost economy, communities discover

By Deborah Frazier

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Otero County, in the Arkansas River Valley, repaired housing for migrant farm workers this year rather than risk losing the labor necessary to harvest crops as well as the \$1 million payroll and \$320,000 in school funds.

"There was no alternative. If we hadn't done it, our onions would be rotting in the fields," said Bob Knight, Otero County business development coordinator.

After fines closed a 50-unit apartment building in Manzanola used by 45% of the area's migrant workers, the county spent \$15,000 on repairs and is seeking federal matching funds. The impetus was Knight's analysis showing that the 550 seasonal workers had a \$7 million impact on the community.

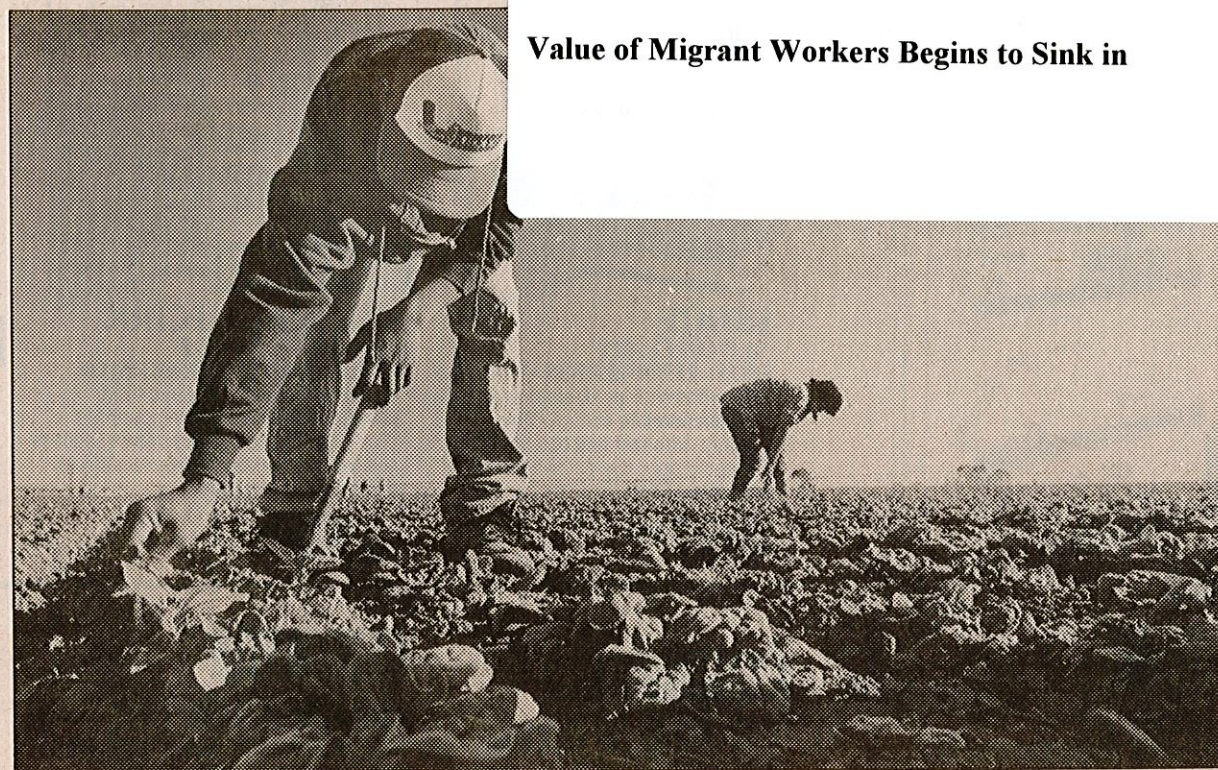
"Those figures are conservative, ultraconservative," said Knight. "The county doesn't want to become a landlord, but it's been worth it to the community."

Migrant worker housing has been a chronic problem in Colorado. And while the number of rooms and apartments available on farms and ranches has decreased, the acreage planted in labor-intensive crops has increased.

In 1991, the U.S. Labor Department cited 1,100 grower-owned units in Colorado for health and safety hazards, said Louise Singleton, director of the Colorado Migrant Health Program. Rather than invest in repairs, growers closed the housing.

The violations varied from apartments with broken plumbing to dangerous electrical wiring to multiple trailers with a single portable toilet.

"Things are actually improving," said Wendell Gallegos, assistant district director for the state



Marco Ramirez, 17, is one of dozens of young farm workers weeding a spinach field near Alamosa.

## How migrant housing fared in inspections

During the summer, a Colorado Department of Health team each week surveyed 47 grower-owned housing units in north-central Colorado, the San Luis Valley, the Delta area and the Arkansas Valley.

The housing units, where an estimated 1,700 migrant farm workers live, were checked for proper plumbing, wiring, trash disposal, wells, septic systems and other items. The results:

■ In 75% of the units, the items

were ranked as good or adequate.

"We were amazed that the housing was as good as it was," said migrant health director Louise Singleton.

■ The Delta area had the worst problems with 35% of the housing rated as inadequate.

■ The north-central area, including Weld county, had the highest rating.

The survey teams also checked 192 fields for portable

toilets, drinking water and water for washing hands — all required by federal law. Some preliminary results:

■ Statewide, 22% lacked field toilets, 23% had no drinking water and 42% had no water for hand-washing.

■ In north-central Colorado, only 13% lacked the facilities.

■ Delta County rated the lowest with 44% of the fields without toilets and water.

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Labor Department. "We don't see people living in sheds or barns. We see them in old houses. That's an improvement over 10 or 15 years ago. Some farmers now see housing as part of doing business."

Fruits and vegetables bring in only 9.6% of Colorado agricultural cash receipts at \$788 million, but

the cash receipts for vegetables — lettuce, corn, tomatoes, onions and other crops that require hand harvesting — increased by 87% between 1985 and 1989, said Singleton. Freezes killed much of the fruit crop in 1989 and 1990.

But the 2,100 migrant housing units remaining on farms and

ranches are inadequate for the estimated 20,000 migrant farm workers needed to harvest the state's vegetable and fruit crops, she said.

In more populated counties, farm workers can rent apartments or hotel rooms by the week. A few live in cars. But the demise of on-

site housing in rural areas could steer the labor force elsewhere, said Singleton.

"Some areas are already beginning to feel the squeeze," she said. Resort restaurants and hotels have lured some farm workers with higher wages. Growers are unable to match \$10 an hour wages offered for dishwashers.

In the San Luis Valley, where the acres planted with spinach, lettuce and carrots increased by 30% this year, a housing corporation was formed last September to address the problem and applied for federal funds to build a 72-room facility near Blanca.

"Adequate housing must be available to maintain the large number of workers needed to produce these million-dollar crops," said Akira Kawanabe of the San Luis Valley's Migrant Housing Commission.

The lack of farm-worker housing could steer large corporations, like Dole, which is considering the Center area for a lettuce farm, elsewhere when they look for contract growers, he said.

In Longmont, federal, state and county money built a 24-unit dormitory — the first migrant worker housing building in the state in 20 years. The rooms at Casa Vista are spare but clean. Workers pay only \$108 a month in rent.

"If you don't give them a place to live, they don't come," said Ray Christensen of the Colorado Farm Bureau, which opposes any government requirement that growers provide housing.

Bill Hancock, Otero County extension agent, said agriculture is the only industry where the employer is encouraged to provide housing.

"It's a philosophical question. The farmers need the workers, but the towns and counties need the industry. It's a real problem. And it's got to be addressed by the state and the counties and the local people and the farmers."