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WASHINGTON (AP) — Migrant farm workers will continue to be seriously underpaid and exposed to substandard working and living conditions until they obtain the right to form unions, a Texas farm labor leader said Monday.

"The situation in which the agricultural workers find themselves is an embarrassment and moral disgrace to this country," said Carlos Marentes, director of the Union of Border Farmworkers, based in El Paso.

"Without the right to collective bargaining, agricultural workers will continue living in poverty and will continue suffering injustices."

Marentes testified during a briefing organized by the Helsinki Commission, which monitors compliance of the so-called Helsinki

Accords in all 48 member countries of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. The Helsinki Accords is an international human rights agreement.

The Helsinki Commission is focusing on migrant farm workers' problems in the United States before extending its scope to Europe and other regions. Monday's briefing was one of four the commission will hold before compiling a report on U.S. conditions.

Commission staffers in the past six months journeyed to Florida, Texas and California to observe working and living conditions for the migrant farm workers, most of whom are originally from Mexico and Central America.

Panelists chronicled grim statistics Monday.

Nationwide, seasonal agricultural services workers earned on average \$6,500 a year for 141 days of farm work, according to the National Agricultural Worker Survey.

"Very few farm worker families are able to emerge from poverty," said Ed Kissam, a farm labor policy consultant.

Migrant workers are chronically underemployed, Kissam said. In South Texas, they average only 6.6 months of farm work a year, he said, and have trouble finding other jobs in the off-season.

Workers are often crowded 15 or more to a two-room shack and sent unprotected to fields just sprayed with pesticides without access to drinking water or portable toilets, Marentes and Kissam said.