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April 7, 1991, Sunday

SECTION: NEWS; Ed. 1,2; Pg. A-1

LENGTH: 1802 words

HEADLINE: Migrant crews still lack shelter;
County hostile to aliens who come to work its fields.

SERIES: Housing for Migrants. First of two parts.

BYLINE: Fred Alvarez; Staff Writer

BODY:

It is a pilgrimage that signals winter cycling to spring.

Beckoned by the promise of minimum wage for pulling food from the ground, tens of thousands of migrant workers are pouring into San Diego County as the days turn warm and the growing season races toward its peak.

This is the time for workers to return to el norte and provide the muscle for the county's \$770 million annual agriculture business, the 10th largest in the state.

Other thousands, also returning from year-end treks to homelands south of the border, will stand on street corners and beg work in construction or landscaping.

But when last light bleeds from the sky and the workday is done, migrant advocates say, as many as 15,000 **farmworkers** and day laborers with no place to live will make do with shanties strung together with trash bags, cardboard and scraps of wood.

Despite a decade of unprecedented development in this county, little has been done to provide decent and affordable housing for migrants.

"It's a national disgrace," said Marc Brown, a **farmworker** housing lobbyist in Sacramento for California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA). "In defense of San Diego County, you can find these conditions everywhere. But you won't find them in any greater numbers than you'll find them in that part of the state."

From Oceanside to Poway, from Valley Center and the Pauma Valley to the northern fringe of San Diego, crude Third World encampments spring up within sight of the Spanish-tiled roofs of new subdivisions. There are at least 200 such encampments in the county, with the larger ones providing sanctuary for hundreds of workers.

The less fortunate make their homes in so-called "spider holes," tiny caves burrowing into hillsides, housing one or two people.

"We are dead-last in terms of providing housing and we should be ashamed," said Cathy Rodman, a lawyer for the Legal Aid Society who has filed a series of lawsuits to force North County cities to build low-income units for **farmworkers** and others. "We have the least affordable housing and we could give a damn about it."

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People generally know little about these migrant workers.

They can be seen, occupying neatly carved rows of fruits and vegetables, bent from the waist and washed in the shade of wide-brimmed hats. They cluster on street corners, frantically waving hands at motorists they hope have houses to clean or lawns to mow.

Most are Mexican and Central American immigrants and most, about 65 percent, are here with the U.S. government's blessing.

They make news, most often this time of year, when the border turns porous and immigration arrests go up. This is the time when they die in great numbers, running across freeways to avoid the Border Patrol.

This is also the time when residents complain most about migrant encampments, about the threat of fire and the spread of disease from rivers of raw sewage that flow from the hills.

"All of these smaller issues tend to cloud the basic issue of the lack of affordable housing," said Claudia Smith, regional counsel for CRLA in Oceanside.

San Diego County cities have provided few low-income units for anyone despite the housing boom of recent years, Smith notes. Today 161,000 county families -- mainly the elderly, **farmworkers**, single parents and the disabled -- need housing assistance.

No one, though, lives more miserably than those who work the fields, Smith said.

"It is a tragedy with no equal," she said. "A combination of factors, when you put them all together, are lethal in terms of failing to provide **farmworker** housing."

The migrant workforce is larger here than in most parts of the state, Smith said, meaning fewer people get steady work and can afford to pay the high rents demanded in this county, which has one of the highest costs of living in the nation.

Because of the border's proximity, the county hosts a larger number of undocumented aliens than other parts of the state. Some housing programs limit loans and grants strictly to documented workers.

No one knows for sure how many houses are available for **farmworker** and day laborers. Only about 10 percent of the county's 6,500 growers provide housing for their workers. There are 37 farm-labor camps, housing a few hundred workers, registered with the state, that are active in the county.

While housing hasn't been built, the migrants have continued to come. Immigration reform has granted legal status to 1 million seasonal field hands nationwide, worsening the housing crisis.

In other areas of the state, where **farmworker** housing has become a priority, migrant activists have spurred the formation of non-profit housing corporations to find money and other resources to build low-income units.

In San Diego County, such non-profit groups didn't exist until a few years ago.

As a result, the county has missed out on more than \$1 million in state and federal funds, as well as money from private sources, earmarked over the past decade for the construction of **farmworker** units.

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Marta Erismann, a housing specialist with Rural Community Assistance Corp. in Sacramento, currently is training two area non-profit organizations on how to work with **farmworker** housing. She agrees that no other area has done less for **farmworkers** than San Diego County.

"It saddens me that people love to have servants cook for them, maids to clean their houses and nannies to take care of their children. But after 5 p.m., they don't care if these people live in mud huts," said Erismann. She urges local government to back the efforts of the budding non-profit groups.

Three such groups in the county have begun to target **farmworkers** and day laborers.

The North County Housing Foundation in Escondido just completed one low-income project that will house area **farmworkers** and day laborers, and has two more in the works.

Esperanza International, in conjunction with North County Chaplaincy, is planning migrant worker projects in Encinitas and Carlsbad. Combined, the three agencies will put up fewer than 100 units in coming years, however.

By way of contrast, a single agency in the Salinas Valley -- the Community Housing Improvement Systems and Planning Association Inc. (CHISPA) -- has built nearly 400 units since its inception 10 years ago. It has another 400 units in the works.

Erismann warns that San Diego County will continue to do little until workers demand better treatment.

"If we accept our living conditions as they are, then we just get what we deserve," she said. "We need to go out there and say, In the United States, people don't live like this.' We need to say, We are human beings and we deserve to live like human beings.'

"No rights are ever granted, they are demanded."

Little has been demanded by alien workers who until immigration reform in 1986 were mostly undocumented. They sought to melt into the rugged terrain of canyons and ravines where they slept and cooked and bathed.

Unlike other areas of the state, where housing advocates relied on the organizing efforts of labor unions to convince workers that they deserved better, this area has lacked an organized workforce with any voice.

As a result, few workers have complained publicly about their condition. They don't vote or attend city council meetings.

To migrant-housing advocates, the lack of activism translates to a lack of political will.

"If you look in the political circles of this community, of either the small cities or the larger

county, where are the political leaders with any real interest or desire to do housing for **farmworkers** or immigrants?" asks Rev. Rafael Martinez, a migrant-rights advocate and director of North County Chaplaincy.

In an unprecedented effort earlier this year, politicians, affordable-housing advocates and migrant workers gathered in a Mission Valley hotel and agreed that not nearly enough had been done. They pledged to work together to turn a tide that has put little priority on providing migrant housing.

What they face, however, are overwhelming numbers of migrants and decades of neglect. What they will battle is the temptation to put up tents and other substandard housing to immediately bring workers out of the fields.

Those who have provided **farmworker** housing throughout the state warn not to cut corners.

"Housing is not a short-term solution, it's a long-term solution," said Ed Moncrief, founder and executive director of CHISPA, the Salinas Valley agency. "People have not addressed the issue for decades and now they're looking for a quick fix.

"But if you make low-income **farmworker** housing your priority -- the way your schools are, and your parks are, and your streets are -- then it will happen."
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Finally, slowly, housing is starting to happen.

A 35-page study, released early this year by the Regional Task Force on the Homeless, chronicles the plight of these impoverished people. Oceanside recently released a similar survey while Encinitas just launched a study of its own.

In Poway, members of a migrant task force will gauge the economic impacts of laborers on city services. City officials plan to use the information to lobby for more federal support in the fall.

A group of Carlsbad residents is on its way to providing temporary shelter for migrant workers. The county Board of Supervisors, which last summer eased red tape to make it easier for farmers to build housing, is moving forward with plans to build a 38-unit migrant housing project in San Marcos. Oceanside will team with a private developer to build a 21-bed mobile-home complex for temporary laborers.

Perhaps the most impressive project is a big, yellow, dormitory-style bunkhouse built by grower Harry Singh Jr. at his tomato and strawberry farm in Bonsall. The 328-bed complex opened in December.

"A few units here and there doesn't sound like much when the need is so great," said CRLA attorney Claudia Smith. "These are glimmers of hope and I am gratified by them, but I am never satisfied by them."

Miguel Gomez knows what it is to hope.

Chased from Mexico by the poverty choking his rural village, he lives in a cardboard village with hundreds of other workers in a migrant camp off Black Mountain Road, near North City West.

His crude shack offered little resistance on a recent afternoon to a steady rain that turned his dirt floor to mud.

"People say we like living like this," said Gomez, a bearded man built low to the ground, who surrendered his job in the fields for a shot at more money building houses. Work is unsteady and on days like today, non-existent.

"I don't know anyone who would like to live like this," he said. "I don't know anyone who would trade with me right now."

Tomorrow: How one community is meeting the challenge

GRAPHIC: 3 PHOTOS 1. A migrant worker heats tortillas at a camp in McGonigle Canyon, south of Black Mountain Road between Rancho Penasquitos and North City West. 2. Migrant worker Jorge Aldana serves chicken cooked over an open fire in an emcampment in McGonigle Canyon. (A-12) 3. Hundreds of migrant workers live in this encampment in McGonigle Canyon, south of Black Mountain Road, between North City West and Rancho Penasquitos (A-12)

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