

RURAL MIGRA

Washington: Farm Worker Housing

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Washington State Governor Gary Locke has made farm worker housing a top state priority in 1999. Locke has proposed a \$40 million plan to build housing for 10,000 people over ten years; to consolidate and improve housing regulation in the state Department of Health, and to create a one-stop information clearinghouse on farm worker housing. Finally, Locke plans to once again permit tent housing for farm workers and cherry harvesters.

The Governor's Advisory Board on Affordable Housing called farmworker housing "Washington state's number one rural housing need."

Washington had a three-year pilot program, which expired in 1998, that permitted farmers to provide housing in tents for farm workers in short-season crops such as cherries. The law authorizing the pilot program, SB 5503, begins: "The Legislature finds that there is an inadequate supply of temporary and permanent housing for migrant and seasonal workers in this state. The Legislature also finds that unclear, complex regulations related to the development, construction and permitting of worker housing inhibit the development of this much-needed housing. The Legislature further finds that as a result, many workers are forced to obtain housing that is unsafe and unsanitary." SB 5503 required drinking water within 100 feet of all dwelling units, lighting and electricity, where available, and heating when the temperature drops below 60 degrees.

In 1998, after the Washington State Board of Health voted to increase tent camp standards, many cherry growers closed their camps. As a result, some farm workers lived on river banks, producing some of the worst housing conditions since the 1930s. Farm worker advocates want more money for settled or permanent farm workers, not just for migrants; growers favor the construction of housing for migrants.

In 1997, at the request of the UFW, Locke vetoed a bill, SB5668, that would have established Temporary Worker Building Codes to encourage the construction of more temporary housing for farm workers. The bill was pushed through the Legislature by Washington's first Hispanic senator, who estimated that temporary housing built under relaxed codes would cost about \$22 a square foot, compared to \$100 a square foot for permanent housing that meets current codes.

The two commodities attracting the most attention due to inadequate housing are cherries and apples. There are about 3,600 apple growers in Washington, but only 200 of the state's 1,000 largest growers provide housing for farm workers, according the state Department of Health.

Mattawa, a city of 5,000 along the Columbia River, attracts about 5,000 migrants to pick apples each fall. In 1998, many migrants camped on land owned by the Grant County Public Utility District, which set up portable toilets and a trash bin, but not electricity or running water just outside of the city in Sentinel Gap.

In the city of Mattawa, many migrants live 12 to 15 people in each mobile home. The state is constructing the Esperanza migrant center in Mattawa to house up to 300 people in farm

worker families in shipping containers, refurbished as living units with windows, air conditioning, heat, bathrooms, kitchens and bunk beds for up to six people a unit.

Some apple growers provide housing to their workers. Ralph Broetje, a 4,000-acre apple grower near Prescott, provides housing in 80 family houses and two 14-unit apartment buildings for many of his 650 year-round workers. Broetje spent \$5 million to build housing, and charges \$350 a month for a three-bedroom home and offers 60 day-care slots for \$7 a day.

Broetje Orchards has a peak 1,250 employees who harvest four million bushels of apples each year. Most harvesters, who get a piece rate of about \$0.01 a pound for picking apples, earn \$5.75 to \$6.75 an hour, with many men in two-earner families working as harvesters and their wives working as warehouse workers. Broetje's wife operates the Center for Sharing, a Walla Walla-based nonprofit agency.

Washington had a large apple crop in 1998--about 100 million 42-pound boxes, or two-thirds of the 11.5 billion pounds of US apples. Washington growers received an average \$12.50 a box for fresh apples, down from \$16 a box in 1997--some experts put the average cost of production at \$12 a box, meaning that many growers just broke even. The Asian crisis slowed exports and reduced prices so much that some growers, for the first time in memory, have left low-quality apples that would be used for juice on the trees because of low prices, just \$20 a ton, down from \$180 in 1995.

The retail price of fresh US apples averaged \$1 a pound in 1998, and the farm price averaged \$0.25 a pound. Americans consume 18 to 20 pounds of apples a person every year, compared to 50 pounds a person in some European countries.

Washington's apple industry has expanded from 5,600 growers and 115,244 acres in the mid-1970s to 3,800 growers with 172,000 acres in the mid-1990s, and most experts predict that the trend toward fewer and larger will continue. Washington State University economist Tom Schotzko predicted that the five largest apple grower-packers will control one-third of Washington's apple production by 2010 and the top 20 will control two-thirds.

US apple growers are worried about increased international competition, especially from China. China is believed to have about one million acres of apples, 75 percent Fuji apples, compared to 450,000 acres in the US. Acreage is expanding; China is expected to produce 40 percent of the world's apples by 2005, some 20 million metric tons. As infrastructure and quality improve, US apple growers are worried that Chinese apple exports may displace US apples in east and southeast Asia. One-third of Washington apples, and one-fourth of US apples, are exported. The US produces about five million metric tons of apples and projections suggest six million tons by 2010.

In November 1998, voters approved Initiative 688, which makes Washington the first state to index the minimum wage. The minimum wage increased from \$4.70 in 1998 to \$5.70 on January 1, 1999, is scheduled to rise to \$6.50 in 2000, and then rise each year with inflation. About half of Washington's farm workers are believed to earn less than \$6.50 an hour.

In November 1998, the Washington State Migrant Council was ordered to repay \$2.2 million of the \$2.5 million received since 1993 in Migrant Education funds. Investigators found that 1,700 children the Sunnyside-based council was supposed to be serving through the Title I Migrant Education Program, also were receiving funding through two other government child-care programs. The Council receives \$20 million a year in state and federal grants to provide social services to low-income farm workers and their families, and more than half of its budget goes to a statewide network of 26 child-care centers.

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