

Substandard housing persists for many farmworkers

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The tents are gone from a Shafter area orchard where cherry pickers were sleeping, cooking and bathing in the open air earlier this month.

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Photo by Henry A. Barrios/ The Californian

Men wait on farm property to see when they will work again and where they will stay in this May 9 photo.

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But substandard housing remains the only choice for many farmworkers in Kern County, where shelter is often a car, a ramshackle trailer or a spot along a canal bank, experts said. The Shafter camp may have been an especially populous example, but workers wind up living in the fields every year, United Farm Worker organizer Armando Elenes said. Most cases go unnoticed.

"People jam in 20, 30 migrant farmworkers in a house or some apartments," said Chris Hengst, a county code compliance supervisor.

Hengst said he couldn't guess how many people live in such squalid conditions because his 10 code enforcement officers only respond to complaints.

"I'm sure we're only seeing the tip of the iceberg," he said.

Filthy dwellings may endanger individual worker health, but they can also create a breeding ground for diseases that can spread by direct contact or food contamination, health and housing experts said.

"We've got to deal with it," said Manuel Cunha, president of the Fresno-based Nisei Farmers League. The grower's group, which has members in Kern, is pushing hard for legislation to support affordable housing, he said.

BACK AT WORK

The workers who were camped near Shafter, making do with portable toilets and irrigation ditch baths, traveled from Wenatchee, Wash., at the request of employer Stemilt Growers Inc., workers and the UFW said. Workers were promised housing as well as jobs at Kyle Mathison Orchards Inc., northwest of Lerdo Highway and Jumper Avenue, they said.

A Stemilt spokesman did not return messages Friday, but last week denied recruiting workers to Kern.

Kyle Mathison Orchards land is co-owned by Stemilt owner and partner Kyle D. Mathison, county property records show.

After the UFW drew media to the site May 8, orchard supervisors told workers to leave, Elenes said. Kyle Mathison Orchards put about 70 workers in a Buttonwillow motel, but later reversed its decision and told workers they were on their own, he said.

The U.S. Department of Labor is investigating to see if the orchard's practices might violate federal laws. The rest of the slack has fallen to nongovernmental agencies, such as the UFW and the Kern County Food Bank, which Elenes said donated food.

Otherwise, little changed.

Kyle Mathison Orchards' pickers are back at work, where they will likely pluck cherries through the first week of June, according to an orchard representative.

MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

Kern County runs two state-funded migrant housing camps which are open from April to October. Occupants must work in agriculture and one family member needs to be a legal U.S. resident, said Stephen Pelz, executive director for the Housing Authority of Kern County.

But workers still end up “out in the middle of nowhere,” Pelz said. “They may not have utilities or proper plumbing.”

Researcher Don Villarejo, who founded the Davis-based California Institute for Rural Studies, said public policy has failed to address the housing needs of unaccompanied men and women who work in the state’s farm fields.

At least one county, image-conscious Napa, took the matter into its own hands. A \$7 annual tax on each vineyard acre goes toward farmworker housing, Villarejo said.

But workers living in sheds, garages or under viaducts can harm more than a county’s image.

Tuberculosis, food contamination and other infectious diseases become a threat when people miss out on basic hygiene and live close together, Villarejo said. About 10 years ago near San Diego, a worker’s camp spawned a malaria outbreak that spread to 26 people, he said.

Steve Schilling, the CEO of community health care network Clinica Sierra Vista, said the health risks posed by unsanitary housing are well documented.

“Is anybody paying a lot of attention to it?” Schilling asked. “No.”

County public health officer Dr. Boyce Dulan was unconcerned that people might be cooking and sleeping outside, provided they have access to toilets and fresh drinking water.

And as long as an employer sprays for mosquitoes to prevent West Nile virus, Dulan said, workers “can get out there and enjoy.”

The camps are less a place of enjoyment than of necessity, Elenes said.

“The county wasn’t even interested that people were out there having to bathe themselves in irrigation water,” he said. “No one’s taking any type of initiative to look at the situation.”