

Opinion/Editorials : Tuesday, June 08, 1999

For migrant workers picking cherries, tents beat alternative

NEW state rules that allow growers to provide store-bought camping tents, along with basic amenities, offer a practical alternative to **migrant** cherry workers sleeping in their cars.

Washington growers are not required to provide any housing, and they are especially reluctant to do so for the short, intense cherry harvest now under way.

Revised rules sought by the Locke administration, and recently adopted by the state Department of **Health**, have collided with the U.S. Department of Labor, which said they fall short of federal occupational safety standards.

Certainly, no bragging rights go with this kind of temporary housing, but growers who meet this minimal standard are required to provide clean sites, safe water, toilets, showers, coolers and lighting. Growers who participate get three years to bring in electricity - via power lines or generators - for mechanical refrigeration and lights. These are glorified campgrounds but they provide potable water and a safer place to cook, sleep and clean up.

Those same **migrant** workers and their families, which can number 16,000 for the short cherry season, will be here anyway. They will be scattered in makeshift camps along rivers and in the woods, with no water, no food storage, no showers and the bushes for bathrooms.

The federal government wants the growers to provide sturdy, military-style tents with flooring, but the vast majority of growers have been unwilling to make that level of investment. The state is trying to help encourage participation with a rent-a-tent program that gives growers access to the larger tents that are erected on a platform.

With the state and feds at odds, growers are weary of getting caught in the middle, and the handful who committed to the

state plan have mostly pulled back. A lot has happened fast, and the confusion is both real and a handy dodge.

Gov. Locke has done good work on **migrant** housing, and he was especially distressed by the circumstances of hard-working people living in unsanitary conditions. The state's latest approach is intended to deal with a particular housing crisis for one crop in a regulatory environment where growers are not obligated to provide any shelter.

All the debates, all the grower-labor tensions, all the regulations should not conspire to make perfection the enemy of vastly improved living conditions.

Migrant tent camps during cherry season are a realistic, doable alternative to living in cars.
