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Farmworker housing issues require legislative action in 2012 session

By Rudy Owens, Nov. 23, 2011

Agriculture plays a critical role in Washington's economy, contributing nearly \$7.5 billion annually, according to state figures for 2010. That prosperity is not shared in wages or measures to ensure that all of the state's 187,000 farmworkers and their families have healthy and affordable housing.

The state still needs 39,000 units for seasonal and local farmworkers in 12 counties, according to a statewide survey by the Washington State Farmworker Housing Trust.

In the upcoming 2012 session and following biennium, the Legislature must address these housing problems, to ensure all state residents enjoy the same basic human rights.

First, lawmakers can introduce legislation that promotes living wages for farmworkers and supports growers. Second, farmworker housing funding should be restored to 2007-'09 levels of \$20 million in the next biennium. Third, the Legislature must lobby our congressional delegation to push immigration reform that provides a path to legal status for our state's estimated 90,000 undocumented farmworkers.

Washington's farmworker housing crisis is, in fact, a public health problem. The state Department of Commerce has noted that the lack of safe, decent, affordable housing for farmworkers severely impacts their health and the future of the state's agriculture sector.

Farmworkers who can afford housing have poor options. According to the Trust, nearly half spend more than 30 percent of their incomes on rent, and 30 percent live in substandard conditions. About 11,000 farmworkers live outdoors.

Poor housing for farmworkers can lead to health disparities seen in higher incidence of infectious disease, exposures to toxic materials, and homelessness. The Trust's survey of farmworkers found housing problems with rodents, heating, and unsafe drinking water.

These impact families. Three quarters of farmworkers live with their families, and nearly six in 10 have children. A recent University of Washington study found that more than half of farmworkers' kids tested had unsafe pesticide levels in their urine, likely from pesticide residues left on their parents' skin and clothes in their homes. Low wages also means many families cannot afford sufficient food and health care.

To resolve these health and housing issues, the state has invested \$100 million in farmworker housing since 1999. Managed by the state Housing Trust Fund (HTF), these funds have helped to build 1,366 permanent units and 9,209 seasonal beds for farmworkers.

At a hearing last month in Olympia, the HTF testified that for every \$16 it invested since 2001, the state leveraged \$84 in federal tax credits, other public funding, and private investment from low-income housing providers.

Yet, only \$3 million for farmworker housing was allocated for 2011-'13. Lawmakers must start working now on strategies to restore past funding levels.

Lawmakers also can correct the "adverse effect wage rate" of \$10.60 per hour paid in our state to farmworkers with valid H-2A visas. State farmworkers' yearly household incomes equal about \$18,000, or below the federal poverty level, and all but five percent of all farmworkers lack health insurance and other benefits.

A study by economist Philip Martin notes a 40 percent increase in farmworker earnings would cost consumers \$16 annually, suggesting growers can pay state farmworkers more, if they had a market.

Our Legislature can follow Oregon's, which last May passed a law that lets lower-income schools be reimbursed for purchased farm foods grown in Oregon.

A fair wage measure could direct state officials to create a certification system for produce farms that pay workers 40 percent above the prevailing hourly wage, and then buy produce from farmers or their coops at a rate equal to the wage hike for farmworkers—like the 40-cent co-pays the state pays for reduced-priced lunches. This would encourage farmers to supply healthy, locally grown food to nearly 1 million students statewide, while boosting workers' earnings.

This could be capped at \$1 million annually and phased in after trial runs in, say, four counties and a year of public education.

Finally, the Legislature should pass a joint resolution encouraging our congressional delegation to support a bipartisan measure called AgJOBS. The bill, stuck in Congress, would provide temporary resident status for undocumented persons already in the country working, including our state's farmworkers. It would set them on the road to citizenship only if they continue working in agriculture for three years.