

Farmworker exploitation

A new B.C. study criticizes how migrant workers are treated

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A study of farm workers in British Columbia released this week reports serious violations of employment standards and health and safety standards, often dangerous working conditions, and dismal enforcement by government agencies.

"Farmworkers are at the mercy of a complex and confusing system that exploits, threatens and silences them while putting their lives in danger," says study co-author Arlene McLaren, professor emerita of sociology at Simon Fraser University.

The study, entitled *Cultivating Farmworker Rights: Ending the Exploitation of Immigrant and Migrant Farmworkers in B.C.*, drew from numerous sources including interviews with "informants" in the government and farm industry, interviews with 53 Indo-Canadian immigrant and Mexican migrant farmworkers, and a survey of 87 Mexican migrant farmworkers.

Among the key findings are: farm workers face dangerous exposure from chemicals without protective gear or training; transportation by contractors is often done in an unsafe manner; one in four surveyed rarely or never had access to a washroom on the worksite; average earnings are just over \$8 with no overtime, and many piece-rate workers make less than minimum wage, and most worked 10 to 12 hours, six to seven days a week; and since 2001 inspection reports by Worksafe BC dropped by 62 per cent.

Housing of farm workers is also addressed in the report, and has been an issue in Chilliwack. Last year the issue of substandard housing of farm workers was addressed by city council at the urging of the Chilliwack Agricultural Commission, as there still is no provision to allow for housing in the city's agricultural zone. The city is currently working on a bylaw to remedy the situation.

A staff report in September said that about five nursery/greenhouse operations in Chilliwack employ foreign workers, some in less than ideal circumstances.

Sixteen occupants were reported in one house in a bylaw complaint from 2006. Another rents local motel rooms, and a local crop farmer has converted a barn to house as many as 30 people and has built bunkhouses for even more with multiple cooking areas.

"In this case, numerous health and safety [code] deficiencies have been identified



CREDIT:

A new report found some farmworkers are without basic necessities such as washrooms on worksites.

by city staff following up on a bylaw complaint," wrote city planning technician Chad Hampson in the report. "Despite this, this 'housing' has been approved by the province-contracted inspector."

Despite the negative reports, Stan Vander Waal, owner of Rainbow Greenhouses, this year hired 30 Mexican farm workers through the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program, and he says it has been a great experience.

"It's working fantastic," he told the Times Wednesday. "It's the best thing we ever did."

While Vander Waal had not seen the farm worker report in question, he said the criticisms do not apply to his business.

"That might be the case in some operations, but not in Rainbow's case," he said. "These guys are way too good to us to treat them that way."

This season Vander Waal had a barn on the property renovated to house the 30 workers, and he said it has been working well, and they are all happy.

"I know there is not a one of our guys that would ever complain," he said.

Despite the positive experience reported by Vander Waal, the report is scathing about the state of the farm worker situation as a whole.

"These aren't exceptions or a few frightening anecdotes," said Mark Thompson, a co-author of the study and professor emeritus with UBC's Sauder School of Business who headed up a commission on employment standards in the 1990s. "These are common, everyday situations in which farmworkers' basic human rights are abused."

On March 7, 2007 a 15-passenger van carrying farm workers to a greenhouse (not Rainbow) in Chilliwack flipped on Highway 1 in Abbotsford killing three of the 17 women on board. After that a Vancouver Sun editorial called for a wider investigation into the treatment of farm workers, and this report is a response to that call.

The study is part of the Economic Security Project is a joint initiative of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) and Simon Fraser University, and was released jointly this week by the CCPA, Justicia for Migrant Workers, Progressive Intercultural Community Services Society, and the B.C. Federation of Labour.

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