

New citrus labor association aids employers

By **CECILIA PARSONS**
For the Capital Press

Challenges with evolving agricultural labor laws and compensation has led to the formation of a new labor association for the citrus industry.

The California Agricultural Labor Association was created to provide citrus growers, packinghouses and farm labor contractors with up-to-date information about state and federal farm labor regulations.

Laura Brown, California Citrus Mutual's director of government affairs, said the association would be dedicated to bringing the best labor law information directly to employers.

California's citrus industry is dependent on a nearly year-round work force. Harvest crews can work nearly 10 months of the year and

are typically supplied by the grower's packinghouse. Some growers employ their own harvest labor.

Packinghouses are commonly direct employers of the workers who pack the fruit.

Brown said application of rules can differ from one operation to the next and this new organization can answer questions and determine how rules apply on a case-by-case basis. A single source of information on labor rules can help compliance throughout the industry, she said.

Answering questions about worker health care, sick pay and proposed legislation on piece rate compensation are among the goals of the new organization. Announcement of the new organization was made at

the annual Citrus Showcase hosted by the grower organization California Citrus Mutual.

"Piece rate compensation and joint liability are only two labor obstacles that the agriculture industry is struggling to understand and implement," said Joel Nelsen, California Citrus Mutual president. "Regulatory compliance is constantly evolving and the challenge of maintaining compliance with both state and federal regulations is difficult and taxing. To meet this challenge, the citrus industry formed CALA, which will serve farm labor contractors, growers and packinghouses alike."

Kevin Severns, manager of a Sunkist packinghouse in Orange Cove, said it is a huge task to keep track of all the labor rules that per-

tain to agriculture.

Check stub information, break time, heat stress rules and compliance with Affordable Health Care Act are all issues for growers, packinghouses and farm labor contractors.

Growers can be liable for labor law violations even if the farm labor contractor is the direct employer. Severns said keeping all parties knowledgeable about compliance is vital to the citrus industry.

Over the next several months, CALA will begin signing up members and hiring an executive director to pull together staffing and programming. The goal is to be fully operational by this fall.



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