

Yakima hotel transforms into farmworker housing

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

YAKIMA, Wash. — A hotel in Yakima that has been mostly converted to seasonal farmworker housing could eventually house 900 farmworkers as demand takes off, its principal owner says.



Robert Valicoff



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

The FairBridge Inn & Suites, Yakima, Wash., on Oct. 17. Most of it has been converted into farmworker housing.

That could happen if Republicans maintain control of Congress in the Nov. 6 election and pass immigration reform that includes mandatory E-verify (electronic verification of employment eligibility), says Robert Valicoff, principal owner of FairBridge Inn & Suites and president of Valicoff Fruit Co. in Wapato.

Industry and government estimate 50 to 70 percent of domestic seasonal farmworkers are illegal immigrants. Mandatory E-verify coupled with foreign guestworker reforms would greatly increase the already growing number of foreign guestworkers, Valicoff reasons.

The 65-year-old, third-generation tree fruit grower was one of the first in the state to use H-2A-visa foreign guestworkers in 2006 as he began to experience and foresaw an increasing shortage of domestic workers.

The company farms 1,700 acres and averages 1.5 million, 40-pound boxes of apples annually and produces about 35 to 40 percent of the state's apricots.

The company's orchards and packing plant operate with 220 year-round employees and, with seasonal help, peaks at 400 employees during harvest from

August to early November.

"About 95 percent of our seasonal workforce is now H-2A through WAFLA (formerly the Washington Farm Labor Association). It's spendy but working. Without it we would be in a world of hurt," Valicoff said.

He estimates his total labor costs increased 25 to 30 percent when he became fully invested in H-2A. That's due to higher wages, more paperwork, employer-provided housing and employer-provided transportation locally and from and back to Mexico.

Valicoff built housing with

96 beds for H-2A workers two years ago at a cost of \$13,500 per bed or roughly \$1.3 million. He needed more housing and decided it would be cheaper in the long run to buy FairBridge Inn & Suites, 1507 N. First St., in Yakima.

A showcase in its early years, the large hotel had fallen into disrepair and financial hardship.

Borton Fruit, of Yakima, bought it for \$3.2 million in 2017 to use for farmworker housing. Borton invested in repairs and then decided it didn't want to continue, Valicoff said. First Street Investments, of which Valicoff is principal partner, bought the hotel from Borton last spring for \$4 million and spent \$800,000 to \$1 million in repairs, Valicoff said.

With new H-2A housing on farms now costing \$15,000 to \$20,000 per bed, Valicoff figures the hotel will cost 50 percent less if 620 beds are utilized by farmworkers for six to seven months.

WAFLA contributed "substantially" to renovations in exchange for a \$12 per night rate for H-2A workers of WAFLA members and first right of refusal on all beds. Other farmworkers pay \$14 per night. It is open to foreign and domestic farmworkers.

Borton, Stadelman Fruit LLC in Zillah, Zirkle Fruit Co. in Selah and others growers along with Valicoff Fruit and WAFLA utilized 580 beds for farmworkers this season, but now that's dropped to 240, Valicoff said.

Of the 200 rooms, 115 have been converted into bunk rooms of four to six bunks for farmworkers and 85 rooms remain available to regular hotel guests. It could be converted to all farmworkers if there is demand, Valicoff said.

The hotel cafeteria provides breakfast and dinner and sack lunches for workers for \$12.26 per day that is deducted from their pay per federal H-2A regulations.



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press File

A front-end loader scoops up urea. Nitrogen prices have increased this year, mainly because of lower production in China.

Chinese cutbacks cause surge in nitrogen prices

Developments in China, Iran and the European Union contribute to hike in fertilizer costs

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

A sharp cutback in Chinese fertilizer exports is responsible for the steep increase in prices for urea and other forms of nitrogen over the past year.

Nitrogen is a major expense for farmers, with the price of such products as anhydrous ammonia and urea ammonium nitrate, or UAN, generally tracking the price of urea, a globally traded commodity.

A ton of urea is now trading in the range of \$310-\$325 along the Gulf Mexico wholesale market, up from a low point of roughly \$160 in mid-2017.

"It's amazing when you look back at how low prices actually did get," said Chris Yearsley, director of Profercy, a fertilizer market analysis firm in London.

While the global market is a major driver for prices, the retail price of urea and other nitrogen products for U.S. farmers is higher than the wholesale price due to trans-

portation and storage costs, varying by region.

Though nitrogen production in the U.S. has increased, domestic buyers are nonetheless affected by trade, said Yearsley. "The market will not be divorced from the international market."

Chinese manufacturers weren't making money producing urea in recent years, causing them to pull back on production, he said. Environmental restrictions also reduced urea production, with some factories unable to afford expensive equipment retrofits.

In 2018, China is projected to export about 1.5 million tons of urea — nearly one-tenth of the 13.7 million tons the nation exported in 2015, he said.

"The supply worldwide has dropped due to China's reluctance to export," Yearsley said. "It's not just the U.S., it's worldwide."

Changing circumstances elsewhere around the globe have also contributed to the lower inventories of urea.

Coal and natural gas, which are necessary to manufacture the fertilizer, have grown more expensive, which has suppressed urea production in the European Union, he said.

Economic sanctions on Iran have also had an effect: Traditional consumers in the EU, Turkey and India have been blocked from buying from that country, forcing them to compete for the fertilizer elsewhere, he said.

"It's a number of factors that are driving this," Yearsley said.

However, urea prices won't likely climb to the stratospheric levels seen earlier this decade, he said.

At one point in 2012, for example, a ton of urea cost more than \$600 along the Gulf Coast. Now, Chinese manufacturers would probably spring back into action and boost global urea inventories if prices rose, which in turn would limit the price surge, Yearsley said.

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PUBLIC NOTICE

The Soil and Water Conservation Commission (SWCC) will hold its regular quarterly meeting from 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Tuesday, November 13, 2018, at the Agate Beach Best Western Conference Center, 3019 North Coast Highway, Newport, OR 97365. The meeting agenda covers SWCC reports, advisor reports, Soil and Water Conservation District programs and funding, Agriculture Water Quality Management Program updates, and other agenda items.

The Oregon Department of Agriculture complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). If you need special accommodations to participate in this meeting, please contact Sandi Hiatt at (503) 986-4704, at least 72 hours prior to the meeting. 43-1/999

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- Back by Popular Demand: Wed. Evening Dine Around Oregon. Tickets available online.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 13

- Meetings:** Santiam Classroom (REPEATS on Thursday)
Training: 2018 CORE Training NOTE: These classes repeat on THURSDAY, 4 credits total are available (not 8). No pre-registration required. Admission is \$4 at the door, parking is free, courses are complimentary with admission. Each two hour block = two credits. Oregon and Washington Department of Ag recertification credits apply.
- 10:30-11:30AM • Jeffrey Jenkins; **Pesticide Human Health Risk Assessment**
A general discussion of the basic principles toxicology and key elements of pesticide human health risk assessment applied to glyphosate case study.
 - 11:30-12:30PM • Jeffrey Jenkins; **A System Approach to Water Quality Assessment in Oregon Watersheds** • Introduction to the OSU Watershed Assessment Framework and more.
 - Lunch or other Break
 - 2:00 - 3:00 p.m • Kaci Buhl; **Worker Protection Standard - What Agricultural Employers Need to Know** • Will cover the requirements for agricultural employers under the WPS.
 - 3:00 - 4:00 p.m • Andrea Sonnen; **ODA Update / Lessons Learned** • A brief overview of updates to laws and regulations and a look at several cases from the previous year detailing lessons learned.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 14

- Meetings:** Willamette Conference Center
- 10:30- 12:15PM • CPR / AED with Standard First Aid (Advanced online registration required and \$30.00 fee) • Pacific Health & Safety will provide authorized health and safety training at the 2018 Willamette Valley Ag Expo. This course will cover CPR & choking for ages 8 and over, AED training for adult and child victims, and first aid for basic injuries and sudden illnesses. Certification from this course is valid for 2 years. • Pacific Health & Safety uses American Trauma Event Management and American Red Cross training materials that conform to national standards that are based on the same scientific guidelines and treatment recommendations used by the American Heart Association guidelines, International Liaison committee on Resuscitation guidelines, and Emergency Cardiac Care scientific guidelines.
 - 1:30-2:45PM • Standard First Aid (Registration required, and \$15.00 fee) • Pacific Health & Safety will provide authorized health & safety training at the 2018 Willamette Valley Ag Expo. This course will cover First Aid for basic injuries & sudden illnesses. Certification from this course is valid for 2 years.
 - 10:30 a.m. • Forklift Certification Training: - Santiam Classroom (Advanced registration required, free with admission) • Includes: classroom, workbook, written knowledge check verification with a scheduled practical driving evaluation immediately following. Proof of successful completion of course, knowledge check, and practical driving evaluation provided. Program and equipment provided/donated by Pape Material Handling and OVERTON Safety Training. Class size limited to 40 people. Advanced registration required online at www.wvaexpo.com. This class is free with paid admission. Class size limited to 40 people. (All materials and instruction is provided in English)

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 15

- Meetings:** Santiam Classroom (REPEAT of Tuesday, November 13-cannot duplicate credits)
Training: 2018 CORE Training No pre-registration required. Admission is \$4 at the door, parking is free, courses are complimentary with admission. Each two hour block = two credits. Oregon and Washington Department of Ag recertification credits apply.
- 10:30-11:30AM • Jeffrey Jenkins; **Pesticide Human Health Risk Assessment**
A general discussion of the basic principles toxicology and key elements of pesticide human health risk assessment applied to glyphosate case study.
 - 11:30-12:30PM • Jeffrey Jenkins; **A System Approach to Water Quality Assessment in Oregon Watersheds** • Introduction to the OSU Watershed Assessment Framework, a systems approach employing monitoring, modeling and geospatial analysis to aid in stakeholder evaluation of alternative IPM practices and BMPs designed to reduce pesticide surface water loading.
 - Lunch or other Break
 - 2:00 - 3:00 p.m • Daniella Whanger; **Worker Protection Standard - What Agricultural Employers Need to Know** • Will cover the requirements for agricultural employers under the WPS, as revised in 2015. Provisions for training, central posting, decontamination requirements, and other topics will be discussed, with questions and answers.
 - 3:00 - 4:00 p.m • Andrea Sonnen & Jennifer Marin; **ODA Update / Lessons Learned** • A brief overview of updates to laws and regulations and a look at several cases from the previous year detailing lessons learned.

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2018 Featured Speaker: Steven Manning

Steven Manning has spent the past 25 years working on invasive species. He is the current President of the Pacific Northwest Invasive Plant Council, current Vice President of the Mid Atlantic Invasive Plant Council, past co-chair of the National Military Fish and Wildlife Association's Invasive Species Working Group and serves on the board of the North Carolina Invasive Plant Council.

The cost is \$125 per person