

Washington Senate committee drops anti-H-2A provision

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — The Senate Ways and Means Committee on Monday killed a proposal that would have penalized Washington farmers who hired foreign workers, passing instead a bill to encourage better housing for all farmworkers.

Since 1996, the state has exempted the builders of farmworker housing from paying sales tax on construction materials.

Senate Bill 5396 proposes to expand the tax break to housing developments in which at least half the units are occupied by farmworkers.

The bill would also allow owners of seasonal farmworker housing to rent units to non-farmworkers during the off-season and still claim the tax exemption.

As introduced by Sen. Liz Lovelett, D-Anacortes, the bill proposed eliminating the tax break if any beds were filled by workers on H-2A visas, who are usually from Mexico.

Farm groups said the bill would make building housing for U.S. farmworkers more expensive because H-2A workers aren't segregated in separate housing.

Farm groups also said the proposal discriminated against workers based on their immigration status.

The Ways and Means Committee adopted a substitute measure sponsored by Moses Lake Sen. Judy Warnick, the top-ranking Republican on the Senate agriculture committee.



Capital Press File

Washington Sen. Judy Warnick, R-Moses Lake, sponsored a substitute bill Feb. 22 that retains and expands a tax exemption for building and repairing farmworker housing.

Warnick's measure prohibits tax breaks for housing built "exclusively" for foreign workers.

Farm groups said their members can't legally build housing exclusively for foreign workers anyway.

By law, farms must hire U.S. workers first and only then fill vacant positions — and beds — with foreign workers.

Vilsack confirmed as agriculture secretary

By **SIERRA DAWN MCCLAIN**
Capital Press

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The Senate on Tuesday confirmed Tom Vilsack to lead the USDA for a second time.

Vilsack, 70, will be the 32nd agriculture secretary. He previously served eight years in the same role in the Obama administration.

He is the former governor of Iowa and has lately been president of the U.S. Dairy Export Council, a dairy trade and lobbying group.

This confirmation puts him in office two months earlier than his predecessor, Sonny Perdue, who was confirmed April 24, 2017. But it's a month later than Vilsack was confirmed the first time around, on Inauguration Day in 2009.

Once Vilsack is sworn in, policymakers say the agency's pandemic relief efforts and other agriculture-related policies can kick into high gear.

"American farmers, families and rural communities need strong, effective leadership now more than ever," Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., said in her opening remarks during the Senate confirmation hearing.

She praised Vilsack's deep understanding of rural America and said she expects he will lead USDA well.

In his confirmation hearing, Vilsack fielded questions on trade policy, the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity and climate change. But because the incoming ag secretary had already faced hours of questioning earlier in the month in the committee, the questioning Tuesday was brief.

Many farm groups and industry leaders nationwide welcomed Vilsack back.

"(The American Farm Bureau Federation) congratulates Tom Vilsack on his confirmation as the next secretary of agriculture," AFBF President Zippy Duvall said in a statement Tuesday. "His strong track record of leadership and previous experience at USDA will serve rural America well."

Duvall said he and Vilsack have spoken "several times in recent weeks" about the opportunities and challenges facing American farmers, and he looks forward to work-



Tom Vilsack

ing with the returning secretary.

Similarly, Dave Puglia, president and CEO of the Western Growers Association, a group representing produce and tree nut growers, warmly welcomed Vilsack's leadership.

"We are pleased the Senate has confirmed Tom Vilsack as secretary. Our work with him during his previous service as secretary yielded positive policy actions for the fresh produce industry," he said in a statement.

Other groups, including some environmental advocacy groups, sustainable agriculture organizations and groups representing minorities, have criticized Vilsack.

"In his previous stint at USDA, Vilsack backed mass corporate consolidation of our food system at the expense of struggling farmers," Wenonah Hauter, director of environmental organization Food and Water Watch, said in a statement Tuesday. "Similarly, he readily advanced industry-driven initiatives allowing companies to inspect their own poultry processing plants, dismantling federal oversight of food and worker safety."

In his committee hearing Feb. 2, Vilsack told senators his four priorities when leading USDA this time will be climate change, food insecurity, competition and inequity.

He said at the time that he plans to create voluntary, incentive-based carbon markets for farmers, invest in regional food systems, maintain strong crop insurance programs, strengthen wood product markets, bolster meat labeling standards and help disadvantaged farmers.

Washington farm settles civil rights complaint

By **DON JENKINS**
Capital Press

A Walla Walla County blueberry farm has agreed to pay \$350,000 to settle claims that it failed to stop a supervisor from sexually harassing and assaulting female farmworkers, the Washington Attorney General's Office said Monday.

Attorney General Bob Ferguson alleged Great Columbia Berry Farms knew or should have known about misconduct by Jose Luis Contreras Ramirez between 2012 and 2019.

Ramirez was arrested Oct. 7, 2019, by the Walla Walla County Sheriff's Office and charged with two counts of second-degree rape. He pleaded guilty on Nov. 2, 2020, to three counts of felony assault and was sentenced to 179 days in jail, according to court records.

Ramirez has not worked at the farm since 2019 and is barred from being rehired, according to Great Columbia's agreement with the attorney general.

The attorney general alleges Great Columbia violated the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Washington Law Against Discrimination, failing to intervene and protect female farmworkers.

In a consent decree filed

Monday in Walla Walla Superior Court, Great Columbia denied all allegations made by the attorney general and stated that it will not tolerate sexual harassment in the workplace.

Great Columbia has always taken discrimination and harassment issues seriously and strived to be a safe workplace, Great Columbia President and CEO Steve Erickson said in a statement Tuesday.

"We were disturbed and shocked when we learned from law enforcement that an employee engaged in criminal conduct and the employee was dismissed," he said. "Great Columbia chose to enter into the consent decree to resolve issues with the victim of the crime and move forward without engaging in adversarial litigation."

Great Columbia must adopt policies and training approved by the attorney general's office to prevent sexual harassment and provide phones for employees to immediately report harassment, discrimination or retaliation, according to the consent decree.

Ramirez was 44 years old and lived in Pasco at the time of his arrest in 2019, the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin reported.

The Northwest Justice Project referred other allega-

tions of misconduct involving several more women to the attorney general's office.

Ramirez had the authority to hire and fire, and assign work, according to the attorney general's office.

"Companies that know or should know that powerful managers are harassing and assaulting their employees but do nothing to stop it bear responsibility," Ferguson said in a statement. "Agricultural workers deserve to be heard, and they deserve a safe work environment free from abuse."

Great Columbia is a 136-acre farm in Burbank, according to court records.

The \$350,000 settlement will compensate several women and cover attorney fees of the state and Northwest Justice Project, according to the consent decree. A spokeswoman for the attorney general's office said Tuesday the entire settlement will be distributed to the women.

At least four women were affected by Ramirez's misconduct, according to the attorney general's office.

A complaint filed by the attorney general's office against the farm alleges Ramirez groped female employees, made unwelcome sexual advances and on at least two occasions sexually assaulted a female employee.



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