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A foreign farmworker picks apples in Orondo, Wash.

U.S. to offer 300,000 temporary work visas, says a top official of Mexico

By SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN
Capital Press

The U.S. will offer 300,000 additional temporary work visas to citizens of Mexico and Central America in July, according to Mexico's secretary of the Interior.

Some of the workers could potentially end up in the U.S. agricultural sector.

"Every day, we are talking with the American government to try to create conditions," Adan Augusto Lopez Hernandez, secretary of the Interior, told attendees at a business sector meeting in Tijuana, Mexico, on June 22.

Lopez Hernandez said "the American government agreed to grant" 300,000 temporary work visas: 150,000 for Mexicans or foreigners who are in Mexico and 150,000 visas "distributed proportionally" among Central American nations.

Lopez Hernandez said it has cost Mexico "a lot, in social terms" to be a crossing point for migrants, and he hopes a U.S. expansion of temporary work visas will help "lower the tension."

An official agreement between the two countries has not yet been announced.

U.S. President Joe Biden plans to host Mexico's president, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, in Washington, D.C., on July 12, according to the White House.

Lopez Hernandez, the Interior secretary, said business leaders can expect an announcement about additional visas to come out of the meeting.

"Now, the president (of Mex-

ico) is going to Washington next month, and an announcement is going to be presented," said Lopez Hernandez.

The White House did not immediately confirm whether the Biden administration plans to grant 300,000 additional work visas, but a White House statement issued June 28 said Biden and Lopez Obrador will discuss their efforts to address global challenges and visions for the future, including "cooperation on migration."

Sean Savett, press secretary for the National Security Council, told the Capital Press on June 30 the seasonal worker program the U.S. has set up with Mexico "has allowed an alternative to irregular migration that fills critical needs in the U.S. economy."

In fiscal year 2021, Savett said, the U.S. issued more than 350,000 agricultural and non-agricultural temporary work visas.

"We have been working alongside Mexico, Central America and Haiti to expand these programs based on need, while protecting workers and ensuring recruitment is fair and ethical," said Savett.

As part of the Summit of the Americas, an event held in early June, the U.S. announced a \$65 million program to expand labor protections for farmworkers and added 11,500 new seasonal worker visas for northern Central America and Haiti.

Savett said the U.S. is similarly expanding its work with Mexico. The two countries, he said, recently created a working group focused on expanding labor mobility and improving worker protections.

BLM urges dismissal of lawsuit over Hammond grazing allotments

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

The federal government is seeking the dismissal of a grazing lawsuit involving Oregon's Hammond Ranches because cattle won't graze the affected allotments until an environmental review is done.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management has begun an "environmental impact statement" of livestock management and ecological health on four allotments traditionally grazed by the Hammond family near Diamond, Ore.

Cattle won't be permitted onto the 26,000 acres of public land before the EIS is finished, so there's no longer any basis for an environmental lawsuit that opposes cattle grazing by the Hammond family, according to BLM.

"The case is moot because there is no live controversy between the parties," said Shannon Boylan, the government's attorney, during oral arguments on June 29.

The Western Watersheds Project and three other environmental groups urged a federal judge not to dismiss the lawsuit, arguing there's no guarantee BLM will actually follow through on the study.

"Right now there is no EIS, so it's premature to declare the case moot," said Talasi Brooks, attorney for the environmental plaintiffs. "We don't know what the agency will do this time, and we won't know until they do it."

The Oregon ranch family was thrown into the public spotlight more than a decade ago, when Dwight Hammond and his son, Steven, were charged with arson for setting fires to rangelands.

Criminal and civil litigation involving the Hammonds has taken many twists and turns since then.

After being convicted in a jury trial, the Hammonds spent time behind bars and were released — only to be re-imprisoned after a federal appeals court decided they had to serve longer five-year mandatory minimum sentences.

Their return to federal prison was met with protests that culminated in the standoff at the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in 2016, which gained national attention.



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Allotments traditionally used for grazing by Hammond Ranches are undergoing an extensive environmental review. The federal government has urged a judge to dismiss a lawsuit against grazing on those allotments.

The Hammonds were released from prison early after former President Donald Trump pardoned them in 2018.

The following year, BLM restored the grazing permit that the Hammond family had lost after the arson convictions.

A federal judge overturned that decision and remanded it to the BLM, but the agency again renewed their grazing permit in the final days of the Trump administration in early 2021.

Environmental groups filed another lawsuit over the decision but the BLM soon decided to rescind the permit decision after the Biden administration came into office.

The BLM now says the lawsuit should be thrown out because the environmental plaintiffs no longer have a problem for the federal court to sort out.

"There is no continuing harm because grazing never occurred," said Boylan, the agency's attorney. "I don't know what the court would be reviewing if this case is not dismissed."

Until the BLM makes a new grazing decision based on the environmental impact statement, there's nothing to fight about in court, she said.

"It would be premature for the agency to declare it will make one decision or another because it has not completed the environmental analysis yet," Boylan said. "Plaintiffs have the opportunity to participate in the EIS process."

Hammond Ranches hasn't intervened in the lawsuit but has

submitted comments on the BLM's EIS process, said Alan Schroeder, the company's attorney.

When the grazing permit was rescinded, the agency initially said it only planned to respond to protests — but it has now undertaken a much more complex process, he said.

"One could be frustrated with the fact they have further reversed course," Schroeder said.

Completing an EIS takes about 4.5 years on average, according to a federal estimate.

In its letter to BLM, the ranch questioned why it hasn't been issued an interim grazing permit, since BLM is effectively "holding hostage" private land that's adjacent to the public allotments.

Fencing off the private property is "not prudent for a wealth of ecologic and economic considerations," the letter said.

The environmental plaintiffs claimed the lawsuit isn't moot because the BLM hasn't terminated the "environmental assessment," or EA, that justified the grazing permit's renewal.

"The agency can issue a new decision based on that EA at any time," said Brooks, the environmental attorney. "The fact the EA is still in effect means the agency can do the same thing again. BLM can authorize grazing based on the EA at any time."

U.S. Magistrate Judge Andrew Hall said at the conclusion of oral arguments that he'd try to issue a decision within 60 days but urged the parties to find an interim solution before then.



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