



Washington Attorney General's Office
Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson announces a lawsuit against Ostrom Mushroom Farms of Sunny-side at a media event Aug. 17 in Seattle.

Washington AG sues mushroom grower

By **DON JENKINS**
 Capital Press

A Sunnyside, Wash., mushroom farm has been accused by Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson of firing female U.S. workers and replacing them with male guestworkers from Mexico.

Flanked by a United Farm Workers flag, Ferguson outlined his office's allegations against Ostrom Mushroom Farms at a press conference last week in Seattle.

The UFW played a "key role in bringing this conduct to light," he said. "We appreciate their work." Columbia Legal Services and Northwest Justice Project also helped, he said.

"Ostrom had a clear goal: Get rid of its female workers and replace them with male H-2A workers," Ferguson said. H-2A foreign guestworkers must obtain a special visa to work in the U.S. Employers must pay them a higher minimum wage and provide transportation to and from their home countries. Employers must widely advertise openings before they are allowed to seek H-2A workers.

Efforts to obtain comment from Ostrom were unsuccessful. The company calls itself Washington's largest mushroom producer. Ostrom moved to Sunnyside from Lacey, Wash., in 2019.

A lawsuit filed in Yakima County Superior Court alleges Ostrom violated the Washington Law Against Discrimination and Consumer Protec-

tion Act. The suit seeks unspecified fines and restitution for workers.

Agricultural employers are allowed to hire H-2A workers if U.S. workers are unavailable. The U.S. Department of Labor must approve the positions to be filled.

Ferguson accused Ostrom with systematically supplanting available female U.S. workers with male H-2A workers who "have fewer rights."

Asked which rights Ferguson was referring to, his spokeswoman sent a link to a 2013 Southern Poverty Law Center report.

The report claimed the H-2A program was "close to slavery," with workers "routinely cheated out of wages" and "held virtually captive by employers."

Scott Dille, a spokesman for WAFLA, which recruits H-2 workers for its members, said foreign farmworkers have rights guaranteed to them in contracts.

"To paint a federal program with such a broad brush doesn't do anyone any good," he said. Ostrom is not a WAFLA member.

According to the suit, the company grows 8 million to 9 million pounds of mushrooms a year at its 43-acre Sunnyside facility. It employed about 180 pickers, mostly women, in 2021.

That year, Ostrom increased its minimum production to 68 pounds from 62.22 pounds per hour. Workers who didn't pick the minimum amount were first warned, then suspended and finally fired, according to the lawsuit.

By May 2022, about 79% of its domestic workforce had been fired. Women were fired at a higher rate than men, according to the lawsuit.

Since April, the farm has hired four female U.S. workers and 65 H-2A workers from Mexico; 63 of them are men, according to the suit.

The lawsuit claims U.S. workers were further discriminated against because they weren't told they were entitled to the same \$17.41 an hour minimum wage as H-2A workers.

The suit also alleges Ostrom hired the foreign workers while rejecting applications from U.S. residents with more agricultural experience.

Ostrom worker Samira Rosas said at the press conference that the company was concerned about "motherly duties" interfering with work.

"They don't want women because as women we have children, we have appointments, we have to go to pick up our kids at school," she said.

The Yakima Herald-Republic newspaper reported that workers and UFW officials marched from a park to the Ostrom plant on June 22 and presented a petition demanding fair pay and safe working conditions.

The attorney general's lawsuit alleges that the company has retaliated against workers since then.

Ostrom operated in Lacey for 50 years. The company said its operations became incompatible with an increasingly urban area. Lawmakers appropriated \$1 million to help prepare a new site for Ostrom at the Port of Sunnyside.

Market for ag robots is growing

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**
 Capital Press



Carbon Robotics

Agricultural robots are on the march.

According to a new report from London-based market research firm Brand Essence, the market for agricultural robots is flourishing worldwide and is expected to grow.

The report estimates that the global market for agricultural robots was valued at \$4.56 billion in 2020, continues to grow in 2022 and is expected to reach a \$26.68 billion value by 2027 — a compound annual growth rate of 28.7%.

Many factors are driving the growing popularity of on-farm robotics, including the increasing cost of labor and advancements in technology.

COVID-19 further increased global demand for agricultural robots. According to the report, more companies the past few years have deployed on-farm robots to reduce risks of human contamination during the pandemic and to fill labor gaps.

The report, which covered Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Europe and the Americas, found that North America is poised to lead the movement toward agricultural robotics.

"North America is anticipated to dominate the global agriculture robotics market due to the high labor cost, increasing technological advancements, early adoption of advanced technology in the field of agriculture and presence of key players in this region," the report says.

Experts from the market research firm pre-

A Carbon Robotics autonomous weeder in a field. Globally, the market for agricultural robots is growing, according to a new report.

dict that countries in the Asia-Pacific region, including Japan and South Korea, will follow North America as leaders in producing and adopting agricultural robots in the next several years.

Researchers and robotics companies have already invented robots that can perform a wide spectrum of tasks, and robots capable of more fine-tuned tasks are expected in the future.

On livestock operations, robots now exist that can automatically milk, wash, castrate animals and perform other tasks.

On crop farms, agricultural robots assist farmers with many duties, including with weeding, spraying, trimming, planting, environmental monitoring and soil analysis.

Worldwide, according to the report, the most common task robots are used for in agriculture is harvesting.

The report identifies several top players in the agriculture robotics market. These include AGCO, AgJunction Inc., Autonomous Solutions Inc., Autonomous Tractor Corp., BouMatic LLC, Clearpath Robotics, DeLaval, GEA Group, Deere & Co., DJI and Lely.



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