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Farm Workers Union wins recognition at Threemile

One of Oregon's largest farms has struck a deal with the United Farm Workers (UFW).

On Nov. 27, arbitrator Richard Stratton certified that a majority of workers at Threemile Canyon Farms want to join UFW, and the company agreed to voluntarily recognize the union as the representative of about 250 workers.

UFW, which represents farm workers in California and Washington, has waged a three-and-a-half-year union campaign at Threemile. The farm, located west of Boardman, Oregon along the Columbia River, includes a 41,000-head dairy and about 33,000 acres of potatoes, plus 2,300 acres of organic potatoes, onions and wheat.

Farm workers are excluded from the National Labor Relations Act, which spells out procedures for unionization. But in August, after a sustained public pressure campaign from the union, Threemile management committed to a private agreement that specified a process for unionizing.

Under that agreement, Threemile allowed union organizers on its property through December to talk to workers on lunch break and before and after work. If UFW could persuade a majority of workers to sign authorization cards — verified by a neutral third party — the company would voluntarily recognize the union and bargain a labor agreement, submitting to binding arbitration if the two sides can't agree on the terms.

UFW, for its part, committed to work cooperatively with Threemile to support sales and promote marketing of its products to customers.

"I'm hoping it will be a preview of coming attractions, and that the agricultural industry will understand we're not the bogeyman," said Oregon

AFL-CIO President Tom Chamberlain. UFW is part of the Change to Win labor federation, but maintains affiliation through "Solidarity Charters" with the Oregon AFL-CIO and Washington State Labor Council.

Oregon Governor Ted Kulongoski also praised the agreement in a Dec. 1 press release, calling it a model for future legislation. Employer neutrality, recognition through "card check" and binding arbitration for first contracts were in a farm worker collective bargaining bill Kulongoski proposed in the 2005 legislative session.

Threemile Canyon markets itself as a sustainable farm, with an annual Corporate Social Responsibility Report and industry-exceeding wages and benefits. Threemile potatoes are used to make McDonalds french fries, while its milk is sold in Montana grocery stores and used to make Kraft and Tillamook cheese. Its organically-grown corn and potatoes go into Kettle Foods tortilla and potato chips and are sold in season in natural food specialty stores.

Oregon farm workers have one other union — an independent known by its Spanish-language initials PCUN, which has 95 workers under contract at several small farms.

If UFW finalizes a deal at Threemile, it will be the largest agricultural union contract in the Pacific Northwest. Currently, the largest is the Chateau St. Michelle Winery in Woodinville, Washington.

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