

# 'Third World conditions'

*New rules to protect Oregon's farmworkers from pesticide poisoning fail to do so, advocates say*



PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

At E&S Farms Inc. in Woodburn, one-room living quarters house farmworkers and their families. About 200 people live at this three-building camp during peak season.

**BY EMILY GREEN**  
STAFF WRITER

To get to the Leary Road labor camp from downtown Woodburn, you have to drive past an expansive strip of “premium” retail outlet stores sitting on the west side of Interstate 5.

“We have the Woodburn malls and we have tons of people – it’s the second-most-visited place in Oregon,” Ramón Ramírez said as the outlet mall appeared through the car’s passenger-side window.

“And less than a mile away,” he continued, “are Third World conditions.”

Within five minutes, we arrived at the camp.

Three single-level buildings housing one-room living quarters sat adjacent to the berry fields at E&S Farms Inc. Clotheslines reached across a grassy lawn in front of the camp. Ramírez said that during peak season, those lines would be covered with clothing, blowing in the wind to dry.

“There’s other farms that I can’t take you to because we would have problems going in,” he said, explaining that many have hired guards to keep advocates like him from entering.

Ramírez is the director at Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste, better known as PCUN. It’s the largest Latino labor union in Oregon, primarily representing immigrant farm and forestry workers.

PCUN is based in Woodburn, where it also broadcasts a Spanish radio station. It’s currently involved in seven lawsuits against the Environmental Protection Agency, mainly in an

attempt to limit or ban the use of select pesticides handled by the farmworkers it represents – ones known to have harmful human health effects.

As we walked up to the rows of housing, clues to life in the camp were scattered about. A toddler-sized bicycle sat outside one of the rooms. A picnic table sat outside another. Work boots lay next to the doorstep we approached. Above an air-conditioner, an open window was sectioned off with cardboard and duct tape.

Two Spanish-speaking men from Bakersfield, Calif., invited us inside.

There was no bathroom and no running water, although communal hygiene facilities were available in a nearby building.

The room had little furniture other than three bunk beds and some shelving.

A propane tank, water pitcher and ice chest sat next to a table covered with dirty dishes, hot sauce, seasonings and empty soda cans.

The men said there are six workers living in that single, crowded room, and each pays \$100 a month in rent.

It was mid-September, and the farm was operating with a skeleton crew.

This is the time of year, Ramírez said, that farmers should be spraying their fields with pesticides – not when camps like this one are filled to the brim with workers and their children. He said about 200 people live at this camp during peak season.

The health impacts from pesticide exposure in farmworkers, their children and pregnant women are well documented, with links to



**“Our people are getting cancer and all other kinds of diseases. Lymphoma, diabetes, tendonitis, back problems – we’re paying the price so that Americans can eat cheap.”**

RAMÓN RAMÍREZ, PCUN DIRECTOR

miscarriage and birth defects from prenatal exposure, neurological and other development effects in growing children, as well as links to a wide range of cancers, tumors and other serious health effects in adults, according to a 2015 EPA economic analysis.

Farmworkers have a significantly shortened lifespan, Ramírez said, and in Marion County there is some evidence to suggest they may have as much as a 50 percent higher rate of miscarriages. This was the unscientific conclusion of health workers at Salud Medical Center in Woodburn after the clinic began to notice a rash of miscarriages among farmworker women about 12 years ago, Ramírez said. Salud did not respond to a request for verification.

Farmworker exposure to pesticides happens in the field, but also when chemicals come into contact with living-area surfaces from spray drift or are tracked into the home on workers’ clothing and shoes, according to the EPA

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