



The hands that feed us

How farmworkers, nationally and in Oregon, are faring in an era of immigration crack-downs, housing insecurity, rising temperatures and uncertainty

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At the height of a sweltering afternoon in late July, more than a hundred people descended from a caravan of air-conditioned Blue Star buses onto Oregon Sen. Chuck Thomsen's (R-Hood River) Hood River Valley orchard. They were there to tour several rows of modest labor housing nestled in a grove of pear trees on the senator's family farm.

The housing wasn't impressive, but it wasn't dilapidated either. Closer to the size of tool sheds than typical American homes, some of the tiny single-story housing units had satellite dishes protruding from their roofs and flowers planted at their stoops. Children's toys and other evidence of family life dotted the courtyard, along with barbecues, bicycles and laundry suspended from makeshift clotheslines strung from one exterior wall to another.

"We wouldn't be where we are today without migrant labor from Mexico," Thomsen told the group.

His employees had no idea the tour was coming through that day, he said, so what they were seeing was unstaged. He encouraged his guests to ask the farmworkers to see inside their homes. As visitors wandered around snapping photos with smartphones and chatting among themselves, Thomsen's employees and their children dodged between them, going about their business.

Thomsen had invited the enclave of government officials, growers, farmworker advocates and housing professionals to his property as part of CASA of Oregon's annual Farmworker Housing Conference. The nonprofit was founded three decades ago to address the housing needs of Oregon's farmworkers.

Earlier that day at the Hood River Best

Western, panelists and speakers discussed how America's farmworkers are living in a constant state of fear under ramped-up immigration enforcement, while at the same time continuing to face economic hardship and housing difficulties that have persisted in their communities for decades.

Farmworkers' very existence is crucial to meeting one of humanity's most basic needs for survival, but throughout U.S. history, they've received fewer rights, worse treatment and greater exposure to hazardous working conditions than people in most other occupations.

While American workers have benefited from overtime pay and minimum wage laws under the Fair Labor Standards Act, for 80 years, farmworkers have continued to be excluded. The agricultural industry is also exempt from child labor laws.

It's only in Oregon's fields that children as young as 9 can work legally, even when the farm is not owned by their guardians. Other states set the minimum work age in agriculture between 10 and 16, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

— ARTURO RODRIGUEZ
UNITED FARM WORKERS

Despite massive labor movements and attempts to organize farmworkers, only

piecemeal improvements to their living and working conditions have been made through the years.

But America's age-old practice of devaluing and exploiting this labor force has taken its toll, and now farmers are paying the price.

With the decline in immigration from Latin America and the increase in job opportunities away from fields and orchards, far fewer laborers are seeking what's readily acknowledged as grueling work for low pay on American farms.

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"We need to elevate the economic situation for farmworkers in this country, or else we're not going to have agricultural workers"