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we're not going to have agricultural workers," said Arturo Rodriguez, who's served as president of United Farm Workers since Cesar Chavez's passing in 1993. He spoke with Street Roots in advance of visiting Hood River to give a keynote speech at the Farmworker Housing Conference on July 25.

He said that while farmworker families continue to be one of the lowest paid groups of workers, many agricultural centers, such as Oregon's Willamette Valley and Napa Valley's wine region, have become unaffordable.

"At the same time," said Rodriguez, "Not everybody can work in agriculture. It requires somebody that knows how to do it; that can tolerate the working conditions that you have to work in."

**A**n ironic side effect of the federal government making life in the United States more difficult for immigrants is that farmers are being forced to make concessions that immigrant workers have been fighting for decades to achieve.

In the past, farmers had a surplus of labor, so wages stayed low and working conditions didn't improve. They could easily replace disgruntled workers.

Now, said Rodriguez, because farmers have grown frustrated with leaving millions of dollars out in their fields because they don't have bodies to harvest their crops, farmworkers are starting to see their wages and benefits increase as their employers compete for their labor.

Some growers have reached out to Rodriguez's union – a longtime adversary – in an attempt to learn how they can make conditions more desirable to workers, he said.

"A lot of major growers are coming to us in confidence, saying, 'look, we gotta figure out a better solution here,'" he said.

Through collective bargaining and other programming, his union is helping growers find ways to improve working conditions for farmers and to ensure people being brought across the border as part of the federal guest-worker program are not being exploited by Mexican cartels – a growing problem.

In June, United Farm Workers secured a contract through collective bargaining for the employees of one of the country's largest vegetable producers, D'Arrigo Brothers. In a huge win for the farmworkers' union, the California-based grower now offers fully paid health insurance to its employees and their families, as well as higher wages.

On the West Coast, lawmakers have begun to pass legislation and adopt rules aimed at improving the lives of farmworkers as well.

In 2016, California Gov. Jerry Brown signed into law a bill that included agricultural workers under minimum wage and overtime laws afforded under the Fair Labor Standards Act, making California the first, and still the only, state in the nation to do so.

When the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency updated its Agricultural Worker Protection Standard, Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), after a long and often contentious rulemaking process, passed pesticide protection laws more strict than the EPA's for agriculture workers, taking effect in January, 2019 (see "After unprecedented input, Oregon OSHA adopts new farmworker protection standards" at news.

streetroots.org).

In recent years, Washington and California have passed regulations to combat heat-stress injuries among outdoor workers.

To catalyze the heat-stress legislation in California, United Farm Workers elevated the death of 17-year-old Maria Isabel Vasquez Jimenez. She was two months pregnant and working in a vineyard near Stockton, Calif., in 2008 when she collapsed on the job in 95-degree heat with no access to water. Her employer put her in the back of a work van with no air conditioning. When she was finally taken to the hospital at the end of the workday, her body temperature had reached 108 degrees and she was in a coma. She died two days later.

California's heat-stress law, requiring that workers have access to water and shade among other provisions, has made a tangible difference, Rodriguez said. Now, when he drives along Highway 99 through the agriculturally-rich San Joaquin Valley, he sees trailer sites where farmworkers are able to sit on chairs around tables in the shade to eat their lunch and drink water. A vast improvement from sitting on the ground, he said.

Additionally, he said, safety inspections are up and heat-related deaths are down. Through educational efforts, workers know the signs of heat stress and they know their employers are required to provide access to drinkable water and medical assistance in cases of injury.

"This has been an extremely hot summer already," he said. "With a summer like this, we'd probably already experienced, one, two, three different deaths."

While California hasn't seen a heat-related death among farmworkers so far this season, United Farm Workers is examining recent heat-caused fatalities on farms in Georgia and Arizona.

**S**ince last summer, Oregon OSHA has been collecting data related to heat-stress violations and injuries as part of its "heat stress emphasis program," said the agency's spokesperson, Aaron Corvin.

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