

OSHA to implement new protections for farm laborers

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Capital Press

PORTLAND — Oregon OSHA announced emergency rules Tuesday to protect agricultural workers from potential outbreaks of COVID-19 in labor camps this harvest season.

Farms will be required to provide more portable toilets and handwashing stations for workers in the field, maintain a minimum distance of 6 feet between beds in housing units and appoint one or more “social distancing officers” on the job — among other provisions approved by the state’s Occupational Health and Safety Administration.

The new regulations take effect May 11, as harvest approaches for labor-intensive crops like pears and cherries in the Columbia River Gorge.

“It’s going to be a hardship for our growers,” said Mike Doke, executive director of Columbia Gorge Fruit Growers. “Housing is going to be an issue.”

Two groups, the Oregon Law Center and Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center, petitioned Oregon OSHA in March to adopt safeguards for migrant and seasonal workers who may be at risk of spread-



Capital Press file photo

A worker dumps cherries from his picking bucket into a bin at an orchard. Oregon OSHA has issued new rules for keeping farmworkers separated.

ing COVID-19. There are approximately 160,000 farmworkers and their families statewide, according to the petition.

Michael Wood, administrator for Oregon OSHA, said the rule is temporary and will remain in effect until no later than Oct. 28.

“This temporary rule reflects the need to rapidly address COVID-19 in operations where the nature of the work — and the spaces in which that work occurs —

raise particularly daunting challenges,” Wood said. “At the same time, it accounts for the feasibility issues employers may encounter as they step up to fulfill these new responsibilities.”

Provisions under the rule include:

- Employers must provide at least one portable toilet and handwashing station per 10 workers. The current standard is one station per 20 workers.
- Toilets and handwash-

ing facilities must be sanitized at least three times per day.

- Unrelated workers cannot share bunk beds in housing units.
- All beds must be separated by at least 6 feet, or an impermeable barrier.
- Farms that provide transportation for workers must ensure 3 feet of distance in vehicles during travel, and drivers and passengers must wear facial coverings.

High-contact

areas in vehicles must also be sanitized before each trip, or at least twice daily if in continuous use.

Oregon OSHA reviewed more than 120 public comments before issuing the final rule. The Oregon Farm Bureau opposed it, arguing certain measures would be expensive and impractical at a time when farms are already operating on thin margins.

More than two-thirds of farm labor camps in Oregon are in Wasco and Hood River counties, where producers grow most of the state’s cherries and pears, respectively.

Doke, with the Columbia Gorge Fruit Growers, said distancing requirements mean fewer beds will be available for workers, which in turn means less crop may end up being picked.

“If we lose a quarter or a third of housing, we’re going to lose that labor force. There’s nowhere else for them to stay,” Doke said. “Hopefully, there will be some ways to figure this out.”

Adam McCarthy, a second-generation tree fruit grower in the Hood River Valley, has about 350 acres, most of which is pear trees. He typically hires about 50 seasonal workers on the farm during peak season

in August and September, though housing restrictions mean he could lose about half his available beds.

Workers might be able to stay in nearby motels, McCarthy said. He is also checking whether the Federal Emergency Management Agency might be able to provide trailers for temporary housing.

“Or else, I won’t get my crop harvested or picked in time,” he said.

Growers are already struggling due to declining market conditions for pears. The price for a bin of Red Anjous is below \$100, McCarthy said, the lowest since the late 1990s.

Green Anjous, meanwhile, are selling for around \$150 per bin, McCarthy said. The break-even price is around \$200 per bin.

“It’s a pretty difficult time in the industry,” he said.

While prices are down, McCarthy said growers increasingly cannot afford additional requirements like more handwashing stations at \$5,000 to \$6,000 each. He figures more orchards will struggle to stay in business as they adapt to the pandemic.

“Unfortunately for growers, I think we’re going to bear most of the costs,” he said.

Forecast for Pendleton Area

