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Cherry picker advocates say time is now for housing

By RICK STEIGMEYER
World agricultural writer

WENATCHEE — Eight members of the Washington Board of Health were urged Wednesday evening to end decades of leniency and force cherry growers either to build migrant camps that comply with state and federal laws or not be allowed to have them at all.

But cherry growers and their representatives, including some farm workers, said the tent camps are

providing adequate housing right now. Growers said they cannot afford to build elaborate housing that would only be used for the short cherry harvest.

"The fruit industry says it doesn't have the funds to construct housing. If they cannot afford it, they should be at the head of the line to get public housing," said Erasmo Gamboa, a Latin America history professor at the University of Washington. "Apply a three-strike rule to agriculture. They do not need any more time."

Pickers strike
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Complying with existing rules could cost growers hundreds of thousands of dollars, said Susan Fox, who operates the 175-acre C&S Orchards on Stemilt Hill with her husband, Nick.

"I have a hard time understanding why, if these people (the workers) want it, why can't we have a camp," said Fox. The orchard pro-

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vided a camp for 150 workers last year but closed it down this year because the rules are always changing, she said.

Several farm workers, farm worker advocates and one farm worker historian testified before the board at a special public hearing at the Wenatchee InterWest Bank. The Board of Health has been holding the meetings to gather information that will help it make a decision about how long cherry growers should have before being required to comply fully with all state minimum health and safety requirements for temporary worker housing.

Board members toured several cherry camps in the Wenatchee area earlier in the day.

A provisional program that allowed employees to stay in their own tents on grower property as long as the employer made certain improvements had been in effect the last three years. The board curtailed

that program earlier this year but allowed tents to be used again this cherry season by an emergency order.

Farm worker advocates would like to see licensed camps improved to levels required for any temporary worker by 2000, with enough approved shelters to house half of the workers in the camp by next year.

"Full compliance by 2000 can be done at the camps the board saw today," said Nancy Pacharzina, a Seattle attorney who represented farm workers in a class action suit against the tent camps last year. A judgment in favor of the workers led the board to end the provisional tent program earlier this year.

One of the camps toured was at the Kyle Mathison ranch on Stemilt Hill. Pacharzina said that camp was already in compliance except for a few minor details like having propane stoves rather than fire pits at every tent site. State regulations allow tents as long as they meet certain specifications, are placed on firm platforms and are provided by the employer.

Six workers from the Mathison ranch, including David Cacho, said the camp is the best offered them on the cherry run.

"Everywhere else we have to camp under the trees," said Cacho, who has worked for Mathison every year since 1980.

Manuel Rivera said he first came to the United States to work in the fields under the Bracero Act in 1957. Clean military-style tents and

meals were provided for hundreds of workers. Conditions were much better then, he said.

Living in a cherry camp is part of growing up and learning to earn a living, said Oralia Zacarias, a C&S Orchards employee.

"Camping is part of being a cherry picker. You get up at 4:30 a.m. and you want to go right out to the orchard and pick," she said. "I grew up in a camp and I'm very proud."

"It's part of my culture, my history."

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— Mike Mrachek, cherry grower

replied, "I don't have a plan for the future. I don't know what I'm going to do."

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Mike Mrachek, another Stemilt Hill orchardist, said the number of camps will be reduced to zero if the board forces growers to comply, whether it be in three or five years. Asked if he had a plan to improve his camp next year, he