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Farm workers take dispute with apple growers to Mexico

Flat Top protesters to advertise against industry

By Genoa Sibold-Cohn
Herald staff writer

Farm workers are taking their dispute over wages with Mid-Columbia apple growers to Mexico.

Frustrated over what they say are low wages, discrimination and poor working conditions at Mid-Columbia farms, striking apple pickers are targeting their home country — a major market for Washington apples.

In fact, Mexico recently has been the top export destination for Washington apples. As of March, about 2.3 million cartons of the state's apples had been sold to Mexico from the 1999-00 crop — which was a 46 percent increase from the previous year.

Workers at Flat Top Orchards of Prescott say they're being "stonewalled" over their wages, despite a five-week walkout led by the United Farm Workers of America.

Now, the union says it plans to run advertisements Saturday in La

Reforma and La Jornada newspapers in Mexico. Advertisements also may run in October during the U.S.-Mexico trade delegation talks in Mexico.

"We're hoping that this will help bring the owners of Flat Top Orchards to their senses," said Lupe Gamboa, regional director of the UFW in Sunnyside.

Saturday is Mexican Independence Day, and the workers are hoping the symbolic day will bring support from people in their home country, Gamboa said.

He said the advertisements will appear as a letter addressing the "exploitation and abuse of Mexican workers."

The tactic has apple industry officials concerned.

"What we do is market apples," said Welcome Sauer of the Washington State Apple Commission in Wenatchee. "Anything that impacts

Apple: Growers contend they didn't roll back wages

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Washington apples is a concern to us."

Mike Gempler, executive director of the Washington Growers League in Yakima, said he had anticipated some action by the workers.

"I've been waiting for it to manifest itself in some way," he said. "I guess this is the first step."

About 30 Flat Top workers remained, outside the 1,000-acre operation Monday protesting what they call "wage rollbacks." The workers claim Flat Top is paying a minimum wage of \$6.50 per hour instead of a traditional piece rate for each bin of apples picked.

But Dave Howde, co-owner of Flat Top Orchards with Yakima-based

Borton and Sons, said there have not been any wage rollbacks.

"They've said we rolled back wages from last year, and that's not true," Howde said. "They're striking because they wanted \$8.50 an hour."

Howde said workers actually got an increase in wages this year because the minimum wage increased in January to \$6.50 an hour. Last year, they earned \$5.75 an hour.

The orchard pays minimum wage from January to August for orchard work such as pruning or mowing. It also pays \$6.50 per hour for harvesting Gala apples, which are easily bruised, because orchard operators believe paying a piece rate would encourage rough handling. For other varieties, the orchard pays piece rates that range from \$11 per bin for Red Delicious to \$16 per bin

for Granny Smiths. "During harvest, workers generally earn more because we're able to pay by the piece or per bin," Howde said. "The better pickers earn more."

The minimum wage increase has been a tough pill for Flat Top to swallow, Howde said, especially because the apple market has been hit hard the past few years.

Gempler said the average apple worker in the state makes \$9.21 an hour, and workers' annual earnings have increased 70 percent in the last decade. The wage rate has increased 3 percent each year for the last five years, he said.

But Gamboa said an increase this year doesn't make up for previous rollbacks in wages. "Borton and Sons did their rollback a long time ago," Gamboa said. "They're the only apple

grower who's paying minimum wage for the apple harvest. The rollback there is very clear."

Gamboa said he hopes the advertisements also will point out the hazards workers face in working around pesticides and on ladders with heavy apple sacks. He also alleges apple growers discriminate against women and would rather hire men.

The complaints are being addressed under the North American Free Trade Agreement. The complaints accuse the apple industry of violating labor rights and threatening the health and safety of migrant farm workers.

Reporter Genoa Sibold-Cohn can be reached at 562-1539 or via e-mail at nsibold@tri-cityherald.com