

# Farm workers' talks with Norpac bog down

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*The two factions have been unable to agree on a commissioner to oversee an agreement between them*

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This was the summer during which Oregon's only farm-labor union hoped to press hard for collective-bargaining votes in Willamette Valley fields.

But stuck on finding a commissioner to resolve disputes and overshadowed by the state's long-running budget battle, the union has been unable

to capitalize on the huge gains it made in the spring.

"It's starting to sink in that we might be looking at next year to organize," said Ramon Ramirez, president of the Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United union.

The Woodburn-based union has been locked in a decade-long struggle to organize farm laborers whose harvests are processed by Norpac Foods. Stayton-based Norpac, a cooperative of about 240 growers, is the state's leading food processor.

In a dramatic reversal, Norpac agreed in February to negotiate a framework for collective bargaining on its member farms. In exchange, the union called off a boycott that was

making some of Norpac's biggest institutional buyers nervous, endangering multimillion-dollar accounts.

The union started putting out feelers on Norpac farms and gearing up for organizing. In the meantime, union and cooperative leaders reached agreement in May on many of the bargaining protocols, including identifying 21 Norpac growers willing to allow organizing on their farms.

But Norpac and the union have been unable to hurdle a crucial juncture: naming a commissioner to oversee the agreement. Each side has sent about a half-dozen names to the other, only to see them rejected. The two sides have exchanged correspondence, but they haven't met face-to-

face for several weeks.

Brian Bell, a Norpac spokesman, said he remains confident that a person can be found whom both sides can endorse as commissioner.

Final details of the Norpac-union agreement can't be hammered out until a commissioner is selected. As the summer has passed, so have Norpac's hand-picked crops with the exception of cauliflower and the opportunity to organize field workers.

Stuck in a holding pattern, union leaders still don't acknowledge having lost momentum.

"We've been having house meetings, going to fields," Ramirez said. "When we go in next year, I think we

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go in stronger and with a lot more support."

As the negotiations have stretched on, farm groups have separately attempted to pass legislation that would ultimately override any Norpac-union agreement. The Legislature passed a collective-bargaining bill in special session that Gov. John Kitzhaber vetoed in April.

The governor said the bill, which would have granted farm workers the same collective-bargaining rights as other workers, needed more scrutiny, more resources and better-defined rules.

With the prospect of a series of special sessions on the budget stretching ahead, Kitzhaber's office then attempted to broker a bill between the union and farmers. But those talks fizzled in late June, lost in the bigger picture of finding \$860 million to shore up Oregon's finances.

"The reality is the budget issue has consumed everyone's interest," said Danny Santos, the governor's legal counsel. "It hasn't really allowed for other legislative agendas to be brought."

The Oregon Farm Bureau, however, intends to bring collective bargaining back to legislators next year. Last week, the bureau's board members voted to adopt a legislative agenda that includes collective bargaining rights for workers but

prevents harvest strikes and secondary boycotts.

"We're just in a jungle right now," said Don Schellenberg, a Farm Bureau lobbyist. "There are no rules, so whoever's able to get the upper hand by whatever means rules the jungle."

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