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Mexican ag workers sue labor contractor

10 plaintiffs allege they didn't get pay or work promised

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Ten Mexican agricultural workers have sued a Santa Paula farm labor contractor, alleging they were promised work but were underpaid, then abruptly fired.

The lawsuit, filed Tuesday in Ventura County Superior Court, accuses Ralph De Leon and his business, Servicios Agricolas Mexicanos Inc., of recruiting the workers from various parts of Mexico, promising them jobs and

fair wages and then firing them while paying them poorly.

The workers are requesting back pay and restitution. In their complaint, they accuse De Leon of breach of contract, failure to pay minimum wage and overtime, misrepresentation, unlawful business practices and other violations.

"I was told this was a safe and legal way to come to work in the United States and that I would be treated well and earn good money for my family,"

Florentino Correa, one of the plaintiffs, said in a prepared statement through his attorney. "Instead, I received a few weeks of work that I had to fight to keep after I became ill and couldn't meet production standards."

De Leon was unavailable for comment Wednesday because he was in Mexico, a woman who answered his phone said.

The plaintiffs, all of whom have returned to Mexico, were recruited in January to pick lemons and other

crops in Ventura County fields. De Leon had them meet in Hermosillo to finalize their contracts, according to the lawsuit.

They were promised work from February to July, at least eight hours of work a day and six days of work a week. De Leon told them they would need to harvest 2½ bins of lemons daily.

The men were taken to a camp near Piru, and worked mainly in Santa Clara Valley orchards, said their attorney, Hector Martinez, of Oxnard-based California Rural Legal Assistance Inc.

A few weeks after they started, they were forced to sign an 18-page contract

that, for the first time, detailed stricter and more difficult daily production requirements, Martinez wrote in the suit.

The workers were promised \$7.56 an hour, but some received just \$40 per day, Martinez said. They were not paid for travel time on De Leon's vehicles, even though they were not allowed to use their own cars.

Some of the men were fired after a few weeks. Others worked into March, and then were let go.

"I came to work; I worked hard," said another plaintiff, Hugo Enriquez Gutierrez. "Now I am in debt."