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Farm-worker bills could spur Pictsweet deal

By John Scheibe

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United Farm Workers union officials were jubilant on Tuesday at the prospect of ending a three-year standoff with Pictsweet Mushroom Farms thanks to two bills signed by Gov. Gray Davis.

The bills, which were signed Monday and eventually will become one law, mandate mediation for California farm workers in labor disputes with farmers. It could lead to a new contract, perhaps as early as April, for 270 workers at the Ventura mushroom farm.

"We will move as quickly as possible to get them a contract,"

said Brendan Greene, a UFW organizer in Oxnard.

Greene said a contract would give Pictsweet workers a better medical plan with dental and vision coverage, a better pension plan and higher wages.

Pictsweet workers agreed to a series of concessions on these and other benefits after the company bought the farm in 1987, saving it from bankruptcy.

"The company told (them) at the time that if they didn't agree to these rollbacks the operation would go under," Greene said.

But once the operation became profitable again, Pictsweet refused to reinstate the better benefits, Greene said.

Pictsweet officials could not be reached for comment on Tuesday.

Greene said he is confident the bills will become law on Jan. 1, despite vows by the Western Growers Association to sue to overturn the new law.

The Pictsweet-UFW dispute will be turned over to a mediator within 90 days after the law takes effect should there be no progress in the negotiations, said UFW spokesman Marc Grossman.

Rex Laird, executive director of the Ventura County Farm Bureau, said the new law is completely unnecessary and bad.

"No other industry was in-

cluded in this law, only farming," Laird said.

Laird said the law also is unfair because it is aimed at Pictsweet.

"What happens if Pictsweet decides to leave California?" he asked. "We'll still be left with this law."

Grossman said the law not only will help Pictsweet workers, but the entire UFW, which has about 27,000 members statewide.

He said new law will make it easier for the UFW to organize workers.

"The law will give workers more confidence about the benefits of joining the union," he said.

