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BUSINESS

# Coronavirus Hits Nation's Key Apple, Cherry Farms

Mounting Covid-19 cases in a Washington county underscore the difficulty of keeping farmworkers safe

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The coronavirus is spreading among workers in the Yakima Valley.

PHOTO: ELAINE THOMPSON/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By [Jesse Newman](#)

July 6, 2020 5:30 am ET

A surge in coronavirus cases in one of the country's top regions for apples and sweet cherries is challenging agricultural operations already limited by rules aimed at preventing such outbreaks, underscoring the difficulty of keeping farmworkers safe.

Recent emergency regulations issued by Washington state to curb outbreaks of coronavirus among farmworkers living in temporary housing are slowing fieldwork in Yakima Valley, but the virus is still spreading, according to agricultural employers and the Yakima Health District. On farms that produce \$1 billion of apples, sweet cherries and other crops each year, employers are hiring

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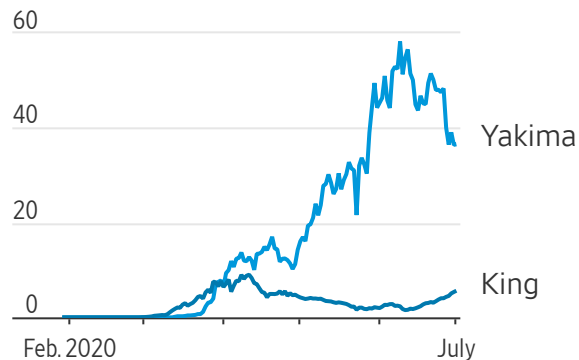
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Covid-19 cases have surged in Yakima County. The county is nine times smaller in population than King County, home of Seattle, but it only has 30% fewer cases than its neighbor, with 7,349 coronavirus cases as of June 30. Roughly one-fifth of the cases in Yakima are among agricultural workers, according to the Yakima Health District.

## Spiking

Yakima County, a key agricultural region in Washington, has been worse-hit by the coronavirus than King County, home of Seattle.

### New cases per 100,000, 7-day running average



Source: Johns Hopkins University via Associated Press

In April, cases involving agricultural workers appeared in Yakima's large fruit warehouses, where hundreds of people pack apples and other produce into boxes. Recently, the virus has spread through employer-provided housing, the health district said. Tens of thousands of seasonal workers from elsewhere in the U.S. and countries like Mexico live in dormitory-style housing, converted motels and military-style tents during Washington's harvest season.

The difficulty of keeping workers healthy in Yakima indicates how hard it has become to safeguard agriculture's workforce, intensifying questions about

how best to prevent outbreaks in labor-intensive workplaces. Growing outbreaks among farmworkers nationwide come as most employers are looking to reduce the threat of outbreaks among their workers and the coronavirus continues to

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Some states are trying to protect themselves as farmworkers travel north for the season from Florida and other places where infections are rising. In North Carolina, officials are supporting efforts to provide testing on farms and in migrant camps as well as planning to help install modems or hot spots in camps to boost access to virtual medical care for workers. A California growers' association is housing in motel rooms virus-infected and exposed workers with nowhere to safely isolate.



A demonstrator protests working conditions in Yakima, Wash., on May 18.

PHOTO: AMANDA RAY/ASSOCIATED PRESS

In Yakima, outbreaks involving more than 70 workers have occurred in temporary housing facilities on three farms since mid-May, said Lilian Bravo, a spokeswoman for the county's health district. She said there likely have been more such outbreaks than the health district knows and that it is preparing to launch a targeted outreach program for workers in temporary housing to try to contain the virus's spread.

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“In congregate living facilities, there’s really not a lot you can do, which is why it’s so important to keep it out of there in the first place,” Ms. Bravo said.

The rules Washington state officials issued in May were aimed at reducing the spread of coronavirus in temporary farmworker housing. They require employers to space beds 6 feet apart or separate them using floor-to-ceiling barriers and in some cases to only use the bottom bunk on bunk beds.

The rules also require farms to isolate workers who are suspected or confirmed to have contracted the virus. Workers in temporary housing must be screened daily for Covid-19 symptoms, including fever, and in some cases farms must quarantine or test all workers who are sheltering together if a worker develops symptoms of the virus.

Yakima health district’s Ms. Bravo said large outbreaks in the region’s fruit warehouses have declined as employers provided workers with protective gear, but that cases are now spreading throughout the county, including on farms and orchards.

“The carnage is skyrocketing,” said Erik Nicholson, national vice president for United Farm Workers union. He said he has filed more than two dozen complaints with the state saying farms aren’t complying with new regulations that require employers to provide workers with masks and enable social distancing in fields. On some farms he visited, hand-washing facilities were out of soap, Mr. Nicholson said.

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related death of a fruit-packing worker.

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Brian Lane, vice president of operations for Domex Superfresh Growers, a major Washington fruit producer, said the company has set aside separate housing facilities for Covid-positive and symptomatic workers, reducing by 20% the number of workers it can bring to the U.S. on seasonal guest-worker visas, and slowing work in its orchards. Seven orchard workers have contracted the virus, he said, though none who live in the company's housing facilities.

Sean Gilbert, president of Gilbert Orchards, said he has brought 150 guest workers from Mexico to harvest cherries and tend to the company's apple orchards, but that he has postponed the arrival of another 150 until August while he determines whether he can house them in compliance with the rules.

Mr. Gilbert said a spring frost that cut this season's cherry harvest has cushioned the blow of the labor shortage, but that work is running two weeks behind in his apple orchards. If his honey crisp apples aren't thinned soon, they will start pushing each other off the trees.

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"Apples will be falling on the ground because we didn't get to them in time," he said.

No workers in Gilbert's temporary housing have tested positive for the virus, he said, though 26 workers were infected in an April outbreak at the

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Many farms are trying to minimize contact between workers in temporary housing and the broader public, said Jon DeVaney, president of the Washington State Tree Fruit Association. Some have scheduled times for farmworkers to shop alone at supermarkets, designated a few shoppers for a larger group or arranged for online grocery deliveries.

Kristin Snapp, director of corporate affairs for Domex, said the company is trying to limit resident farmworkers' outings while responding to their desires to leave the farm, including on days off.

"It's the existential crisis of the moment," Ms. Snapp said. "There isn't really any precedent for how to farm in a pandemic."

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