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FEATURED

Washington farm investigated in wake of COVID-19 death

By DON JENKINS Capital Press

Jul 27, 2020



Washington State Department of
Labor & Industries

Washington L&I

A farmworker's death from COVID-19 has led to an investigation into whether workers assigned to bunk beds were properly isolated at Gebbers Farms, a large fruit grower in north-central Washington, according to the Department of Labor and Industries.

The man, a Mexican national, died July 8. He was in his 30s and had no chronic or underlying health problem, officials said. Acting on a complaint by the United Farm Workers, L&I investigated and ordered Gebbers on July 22 to stop using bunk beds or come into compliance with rules set by L&I and the Health Department.

“Our initial inspection found indications that the groups using bunk beds were not being kept separate from other workers during transportation and while working in the fields,” L&I spokesman Tim Church said in an email Monday.

Gebbers spokeswoman Amy Philpott said a consultant helped the farm develop a housing plan. The farm sent the plan to L&I for approval, but didn't hear back, she said.

The farm is working with L&I and doing everything it can to keep workers safe, she said.

Farms can apply to vary from the housing rules. “In this case, the company applied for a variance, but it has not been granted so they must follow the existing requirements,” Church said.

When the state agencies developed emergency rules to prevent the coronavirus from spreading in farmworker housing, bunk beds were a main issue.

L&I originally proposed prohibiting bunk beds. Farm groups said a ban would cut in half the number of beds available for foreign workers. Washington farms are expected to hire up to 30,000 workers on H-2A visas this year.

The state settled on allowing bunk beds in units that house up to 15 workers. The workers form a “cohort” and must be kept apart from other workers.

Under the order issued by L&I, the farm must stop using bunk beds, unless they separate out those workers from the rest of the work force, Church said.

Gebbers Farms produces more cherries than any other orchard in the world, according to its website. It’s also a large apple grower.

The farm’s payroll peaks at about 4,500 workers. About half are foreign workers in the country on H-2A visas, Philpott said.

The farms knows of 120 workers who have tested positive for COVID-19 since the beginning of the pandemic, Philpott said. Another 156 displayed symptoms and either were quarantined because they declined to be tested or returned to their home country, she said.

“The company has been strongly encouraging employees to be tested,” Philpott said.

UFW National Vice President Erik Nicholson said Monday that the farm should test every worker to determine the spread of the disease.

“This is the biggest outbreak in Washington state agriculture that I’m aware of,” he said.

COVID-19 cases have been surging in Okanogan County, where Gebbers is based.

County health officials had confirmed 401 cases in the previous 14 days, Okanogan County Public Health reported Monday. Until then, 234 cases had been confirmed in the prior four months.

County health officials did not report how many of the sick are farmworkers. Efforts to obtain that information from the district were unsuccessful.

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