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AGRICULTURE

State senator pushes reforms to stop abuse of farmworkers

As mounting civil lawsuits and criminal charges are filed alleging exploitation of farmworkers in North Florida, a state senator said it's time to change the way the industry does business.

BY RONNIE GREENE

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In North Florida, where the farm fields are often tainted with abuse, a state senator is pushing a series of reforms that could shake the quiet nook of agriculture country and reshape the treatment of workers who harvest its crops.

The push -- which faces an uncertain road in the Legislature -- comes at a time of unprecedented scrutiny into the treatment of workers who toil in rural hubs south of Jacksonville and 40 long minutes from the bustle of Interstate 95.

Earlier this month, federal agents raided an East Palatka housing camp, and criminal charges were brought against the labor boss in an ongoing inquiry into alleged abuse of workers and the environment.

Last week, a federal lawsuit was filed in Jacksonville against another labor boss by four laborers who say they were threatened, beaten, forced to pay kickbacks and housed in hovels. Other suits have targeted abuses by other nearby bosses and growers.

"I want to see if we can move toward some true reforms in the industry, so we can do away with these series of embarrassments in the state of Florida," said Sen. Anthony "Tony" Hill Sr., a Democrat representing parts of St. Johns, Putnam, Duval and other counties.

Hill is calling a town hall meeting July 13 in Palatka to press for permanent change, and he is inviting growers, workers, advocates and others.

He wants to move away from the squalid labor camps that have become synonymous with abuse and to replace them with affordable co-op housing. "It just has a negative connotation when you say, 'Labor camp,'" he said. "It has gotten to the point where we have upgraded our machinery more than our housing."

He wants to increase penalties against those who sell crack cocaine and other drugs to impoverished laborers on farmworker compounds and to open drug and alcohol rehab centers where farm laborers reside.

And he wants to eliminate cash pay to workers, aiming to bring an oft-underground economy out in the open.

"We've been on the low road too long. And the theme of this town hall meeting is: Going on the high road and staying on the high road," Hill said this week. "We want to throw as much mud up on the wall and what sticks, sticks."

REACTIONS

The senator hopes the industry is receptive, saying a strong workforce only enhances their business.

Sen. J.D. Alexander, the Republican majority whip and himself a citrus grower, said he would look closely at Hill's proposals, noting that he has worked with his fellow senator in the past on agriculture issues.

"I would look at it with him to make it clear that Florida agriculture and Florida, the state, are not going to tolerate people mistreating folks," Alexander said. "Some of these out of sight, out of mind labor camps are where some of these abuses have occurred."

In the past, Florida's politically powerful growers have fought some reform measures that advocates say would have improved working conditions. If the industry fights, reform odds are long.

"We are always in favor of legislation that works to improve the situation and helps get rid of the bad apples," said Casey Pace, a spokeswoman for Florida Citrus Mutual, the state's largest association of citrus growers.

Pace said Wednesday the group couldn't yet comment on Hill's specific ideas, because it had not had a chance to fully consider them. "Before I say yes we would 100 percent support it, we would need to see it," she said.

Industry officials say most in their ranks respect the law and laborers. Yet Florida agriculture has suffered a series of black eyes, and advocates say the time is ripe for change.

MODERN-DAY SLAVES

A Herald investigation in 2003, *Fields of Despair*, documented how some farmworkers in North Florida live like modern-day slaves, telling harrowing stories of being beaten, cheated or exploited.

Allegations keep coming, the most recent this month in a lawsuit against a longtime Elkton labor boss and the St. Augustine potato growers who hired him.

Alexander Dawkins, Von Jennings, Lamar Nixon and Thomas Watson Jr. all worked for labor contractor Ronald Uzzle, who provided potato workers for Gregory W. and Mark H. Jones, directors of Picolata Produce Farms and Rufs Potato Co.

The suit says Uzzle and his associates docked the workers' pay by demanding 100 percent interest on wage advances, then threatened or intimidated them when they complained.

". . . The plaintiffs were routinely deprived of virtually all of their wages, leaving them trapped in a cycle of debt and coercion to pay off the debts," said the suit, filed by attorneys Lisa Butler and Gregory Schell.

The suit said the workers earned less than minimum wage in the 2003 and 2004 potato harvest seasons and that Uzzle housed them in shabby motel camps in North Florida and in Delaware while they worked in Maryland.

ACCUSATION

Dawkins said an Uzzle underling "attacked and battered" him after he complained about work conditions in 2003 at the Delaware motel.

The suit includes a racketeering count against Uzzle, meaning the workers believe the labor boss engaged in a pattern of activity that includes "loan sharking, usury, extortion and collection of unlawful debts."

The suit said the growers failed to ensure that the laborers, all black U.S. citizens, were properly paid and housed.

"I'm not going to talk about that," grower Mark Jones said on Tuesday. He said his brother would not comment.

Sean Sheppard, an attorney representing Uzzle in another case, did not return a call seeking comment on

Wednesday.

The civil suit comes less than a month after East Palatka farm contractor Ronald R. Evans Sr. was arrested on five charges of lying to U.S. Labor officials and allowing three underlings to transport workers without license. The underlings also face charges in a case authorities say could mushroom. Evans has not replied to five interview requests.

Another civil suit filed this year in Jacksonville names a third labor boss and the grower who hired him and includes allegations of illegal pay, poor housing, threats and abuse.

Combined, the new lawsuits and expanding federal inquiry represent a frontal assault on what advocates say is long-standing exploitation of the mostly poor, mostly black laborers lured to North Florida.