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Farmworkers face uncertainty after Wilma

Many migrant laborers in Florida have lost their homes as well as their jobs in the aftermath of Hurricane Wilma. But some help is in the works.

BY Mike Schneider

Associated Press

IMMOKALEE - The migrant farmworkers who pick more than half of the nation's winter vegetable supply and three-quarters of the U.S. citrus stock have been left a season of uncertainty by Hurricane Wilma.

Many mobile homes where farmworkers lived were crushed. Farm laborers lost a week of work during one of the busiest times of the season, and the need to replant tomatoes and vegetables destroyed during the storm may create a lull that could last into February. Now growers are worried that laborers will search for jobs elsewhere.

"It's going to be more difficult this year," said laborer Escalante Salvas, 50, of Chiapas, Mexico, who is considering looking for work in tomato fields further north near the Tampa area. "So much fell off. So much is gone."

For now, there's plenty of work to be found in the southern half of the state where Wilma ravaged orange and grapefruit groves and tomato, lettuce, celery, sugar cane and radish fields. Vegetable crops need to be replanted, greenhouses have to be repaired, fields must be drained and tree limbs need to be removed.

But that abundance of work likely will diminish in four to six weeks. Then it will be another one to three months before the harvest begins.

"That's the crisis I'm worried about," said Barbara Mainster, executive director of the Redlands Christian Migrant Association in Immokalee, which is about 40 miles southwest of Lake Okeechobee.

During the winter growing season, Florida's farmworker population ranges from 150,000 to 300,000 people, behind only California and Texas.

While food and water arrived in some farming communities like Immokalee, it was slow to get to the farming areas around Lake Okeechobee, such as Pahokee, Belle Glade and Clewiston. Days after the storm, some families still were living in destroyed trailers, Mainster said.

"It's a disaster," said Mainster, who faulted relief efforts in those areas for not being at local churches, near farmworkers, and for lacking Spanish announcements. "People in rural areas don't live close, so to get to those staging areas, they're using their last gas to get ice."

Mexico's consul general in Miami, Jorge Lomonaco, said he was more concerned about getting food and water to farmworkers in places like Pahokee rather than worried about their job prospects for the season. Many of the laborers are Mexican.

"Agriculture always is a moving situation and they adapt to that situation," Lomonaco said. "If jobs are not available for some reason, they will go somewhere else."

But finding jobs outside farming communities may be difficult for some in the middle of the winter season.

"The people here don't have transportation, cars or bicycles, so it's difficult to look for work outside of Immokalee," said Romeo Ramirez, who works for the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a labor advocacy group.

State government officials and some of the growers said they're trying to fill in some of the rips in the economic netting caused by Wilma.

In the coming weeks, the state Department of Children & Families will offer one-time disaster food stamps that range from \$152 to \$912 depending on family size. Unlike the regular food stamp program, illegal workers won't be disqualified from applying.

A. Duda & Sons Inc., which grows sweet corn, radishes, celery and citrus in Florida, procured 46 mobile homes for farmworkers to replace those that were destroyed and was providing food and water.

Gargiulo Inc., which is one of the largest tomato producers in the nation, has suspended the rent of \$15 a week it charges to nearly 1,000 farmworkers for housing in southwest Florida.

"It's really catastrophic for the industry," said Tim Nance, a director of Gargiulo's operations in the eastern United States. "We're worried about our people and trying to do everything to help them."