



MAY 2023

Cultivating Home:

A Study of
Farmworker Housing
in Hood River,
Marion, Morrow, and
Yamhill Counties in
Oregon

Executive Summary



Acknowledgements

This project and report were sponsored by the Oregon Housing and Community Services Department (OHCS).

Thank you to Chelsea Bunch, MSW, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Officer at OHCS for tirelessly supporting this project from start to finish.

We also thank the following OHCS staff for special project support.

- Tim Mahern-Macias
- Megan Bolton
- Elise Cordle Kennedy

The project was implemented by the Stamberger Outreach Consulting team, including:

- Stamberger Outreach Consulting LLC
- PKS International LLC
- ECO Northwest

For their work conducting farmworker interviews, we thank the following community engagement liaisons:

- Sandra Valdez
- Adriana Zuniga
- Romeo Sosa

We also thank our anonymous farmworker and agricultural employer interviewees for your labor, commitment, and dedication. Thank you also to agency staff interviewees for the overarching context you provided to this project.

“When a group of people get together, it's collective power. You know that you're doing it for the good.”

- Dolores Huerta

Thank you to the Oregon Child Development Coalition for review and recruitment support, Hanna Lee for review, and Wendy Stamberger of The Stamberger Company for design services.

Thank you to the following organizations for helping with project logistics:

- Boardman Pool & Recreation Center
- Mano a Mano
- Unidos Bridging Community
- Oregon Human Development Corporation (OHDC)

Special thanks to the Data and Research Committee of the Agricultural Workforce Housing Facilitation Team (AWHFT) for guiding and informing this project. The committee included:

- Chelsea Bunch, OHCS
- Claudia Cantu, Farmworker Housing Development Corporation (FHDC)
- Laurie Hoefer, Legal Services of Oregon
- Karen Shawcross, Citizen Advocate
- Gerardo Sandoval, University of Oregon

Authors

JAMIE STAMBERGER

Research Director,
Stamberger Outreach Consulting

BETH GOODMAN

Project Director and Senior Policy Advisor,
ECONorthwest

JENNIFER CANNON, AICP

Project Manager and Planner,
ECONorthwest

ARIEL KANE

Associate, ECONorthwest

Executive Summary

Project Context

Migrant and seasonal agricultural workers are the foundation of Oregon's large and important agricultural sector. There are more than 531,000 jobs connected to Oregon agriculture, food and fiber, and agriculture contributes \$42 billion to Oregon's economy each year. As of 2017, there are an estimated 100,122 farmworkers in Oregon, doing the skilled and difficult work of growing, picking, and packing the food on our tables. **Most of Oregon's farmworkers earn very low wages, and many farmworker households are in poverty.**

Due to low wages and a lack of affordable housing, Oregon's farmworkers have few housing options and often live in poor and overcrowded conditions. Lack of housing options leads to health disparities and perpetuates poverty and poor outcomes for farmworkers. It also adds to the difficulty employers face finding enough workers to harvest their crops, impacting crop production in Oregon. The Oregon Housing and Community Services Department (OHCS) commissioned Stamberger Outreach Consulting to conduct an agricultural worker housing study of Hood River, Marion, Morrow, and Yamhill Counties to further understand the context surrounding farmworker housing and work towards solutions to this complex problem. This Executive Summary outlines the study approach and high-level findings and recommendations. The findings of this study will be used to identify solutions for farmworker housing and direct resources to those solutions.

Project Approach

The best understanding comes from lived experience. A central goal of this study was to hear the experiences and recommendations of farmworkers and agricultural employers in order to better understand the context surrounding farmworker housing and to highlight their requests in our recommendations.

To facilitate this, we conducted individual interviews with 80 farmworkers and nine agricultural employers. Our study focused on local, U.S.-based farmworkers and did not include H-2A visa workers. We also conducted key informant interviews with agency staff who work closely on housing issues with farmworkers and agricultural employers.

As part of the study team, leading housing researchers from ECO Northwest used farmworker population estimates and housing data from the US Census, American Community Survey, OHCS, farmworker housing providers, and the private real estate market to estimate the need for farmworker housing. To provide additional context, the study also included farmworker demographic research and characterization of local agricultural markets. In addition to members of the AWHFT, farmworkers who participated in the study also reviewed and provided comments on this final study report.

Key findings & recommendations

Profile of Oregon farmworkers

Researchers at the US Employment and Training Administration's National Agricultural Worker Survey (NAWS) provided our team with farmworker demographic information for the Oregon/Washington region. Their surveys show that Oregon and Washington's farmworkers tend to be about 40% female and 60% male, and most are 25-50 years old. Most workers are seasonal or permanent workers who are settled, and a smaller proportion are migrant workers. Most farmworkers were born in Mexico and identify as Latino/a/e or Mexican. Some indicated they have indigenous heritage. About one third report a 4th grade to 7th grade education level, with another quarter reporting 8th to 11th grade. Twenty-one percent said they had a 12th grade education or higher. About half are married with children, 12 percent are unmarried parents, and a quarter are single with no children.

Farmworkers in Oregon and Washington have very low incomes and many experience poverty. Thirty-two percent of farmworker households in Oregon and Washington are in poverty, compared to the national estimate of 14 percent for the general US population.

32%
of
farmworker
households
in Oregon and Washington are
in poverty,
compared to the national
estimate of 14% for the
general US population.

Changing farmworker numbers

Farmworker population estimates show a 3 to 5 percent decrease in the number of US-based (or "domestic") farmworkers from 2012 to 2017 in Hood River, Marion, Morrow, and Yamhill Counties, and a decrease of 13 percent across the state of Oregon. Interviews with employers and agency experts corroborate this data, saying there has been a decline in the number of farmworkers in recent years. Conversely, there has been an increase in the number of H-2A visa workers in three of the four counties and at the state-level

over the past five years (decrease in Yamhill County). Even with this increase, H-2A workers comprise a small percentage of Oregon's farmworkers.

Employers said the decrease in local farmworkers impacts them financially, including increased cost of labor, not being able to harvest their product, and not being able to find the skilled workers they need. They said farmers are mechanizing as much of their operations as possible to reduce the need for labor, and that employers are shifting towards hiring H-2A visa workers, specifically from Mexico, to make up for a lack of local workers.

Overarching farmworker housing findings & recommendations

A diverse approach should be taken to increase farmworker access to good quality housing. This includes building new affordable housing, and it also includes investing in supportive services, regulation changes, and partnerships to increase farmworker income, reduce housing eligibility barriers, increase homeownership, improve on-farm housing, and increase the ability to track changes in housing need over time. Through our interviews with farmworkers, employers and agency experts, and our analysis of available data, the Stamberger Outreach team identified eight critical issues for farmworker housing. These issues must be addressed in order to meet the need for farmworker housing.

1

Farmworkers earn very low incomes

The average farmworker family in Oregon earns **\$20,000-\$24,999** per year, which is between 25 and 37 percent of Median Family Income (MFI) for the general population.

Farmworkers live in poor housing and overcrowded conditions largely because they cannot afford better housing.

Today's low farmworker incomes are connected to a long history of agricultural labor exploitation in the United States. Agricultural labor exploitation is inextricably intertwined with racism in the United States, as those exploited for farm labor were historically primarily Black, Indigenous, Latine, and other People of Color, immigrants, and refugees, and today are primarily Latine immigrants from Mexico. Global competition makes it hard for farmers to earn a profit, which in turn perpetuates low pay for farmworkers as farmers work to keep costs low to stay competitive.

Recommendations

- **Increase farmworker incomes.**

Increasing farmworker incomes will help farmworkers access better housing and lead to better life outcomes, as well as work towards a less exploitative agricultural system that pays workers what they need to thrive. Examples of opportunities to increase farmworker household income include allowing them to collect overtime, increasing their hourly wage, reducing farmworker income taxes, increasing employment benefits and access to social services, and providing direct government subsidies to farmworkers.

When working to increase farmworker wages, it is important to acknowledge that asking farmers to increase what they pay for labor will put many of them at financial risk. It is important to work with farmers to transition to higher farmworker incomes while reducing negative impacts on local farm businesses.

- **Provide direct rental assistance to farmworkers.**

Rental assistance for farmworkers can be provided through a voucher system like HUD Section 8 or through direct financial assistance paid to farmworkers. OHCS could explore ways to expand eligibility requirements for the Section 8 voucher program to include more farmworkers. Advocacy for universal voucher support at the federal government level is important since this could help make housing choice vouchers more universally available to qualifying low-income households.

2

There is an extreme shortage of good quality housing at prices farmworkers can afford.

There are an estimated **66,269** farmworker households in Oregon. Most of these households need affordable housing that is not currently available.

Due to low incomes and lack of affordable housing, we found that most farmworkers are cost-burdened by their housing costs, and 77 percent live in overcrowded conditions. There is much less subsidized farmworker housing than is needed, and even current costs of subsidized housing may not be affordable for farmworkers. Employer-provided housing is also in short supply. Farmworker population estimates indicate there were a total of 83,731 farmworkers and their family members (33,584 farmworkers) in Hood River, Marion, Morrow, and Yamhill Counties combined in 2017. Based on an estimated household size of 3.9 people, there are about 5,177 farmworker households in Hood River County, 9,598 households in Marion County, 1,135 in Morrow County,

and 5,559 in Yamhill County. There are an estimated 66,269 farmworker households in Oregon. According to our analysis, most of these households need affordable housing that is not currently available.

Recommendations

Increase the supply of housing that farmworkers can afford.

A variety of affordable housing options should be provided to serve diverse farmworker housing needs associated with household size and composition, tenure, need for temporary housing, and farmworker preferences. When increasing farmworker housing in urban areas, developers should consider cost effective means to support farmworker commutes to agricultural areas, which may take the form of public transit or transportation sponsored by employers or a nonprofit organization.

The following list outlines the types of affordable housing that should be considered for development.

- **Low-income rental housing**

Low-income housing was the most common type of additional housing requested by farmworkers in interviews. OHCS should evaluate available resources to support development of additional income-restricted rental housing for farmworkers.

- **Seasonal housing**

Migrant workers only stay in the area during the harvest season, and some said it is hard to find seasonal housing for a temporary stay. They requested more seasonal housing. Employers and agency staff also said there is a big need for seasonal housing. Fluctuating cash

flow makes it difficult for seasonal housing to generate enough income to cover fixed operating costs without some type of additional operating subsidy. The State of Oregon could consider providing operating subsidies for this type of housing or ask agricultural employers to contribute to help boost the supply of seasonal housing available to farmworkers.

- **Housing for older people, single women, and families**

A small number of workers we interviewed requested more housing for older people, single women, and families.

- **Employer-provided housing**

A few farmworkers we interviewed requested more on-farm housing. They said they depend on this free housing. Due to frequent descriptions of poor on-farm housing, the difficulty employers face building and managing housing, and the many other types of housing that may be developed to support farmworkers, we encourage OHCS to consider alternatives to the development of new employer-provided housing. There may be ways to increase access to good quality employer-provided housing that do not require building additional housing. Examples include shared employer-provided housing, portable temporary housing, and improving conditions of existing employer-provided housing.

- **Community-based farmworker housing**

Success has been had in Oregon developing and managing community-based farmworker housing through partnerships with nonprofits, however there are far too few of these units to meet the need. Additionally, some of this

housing may not be affordable for farmworker households given their income. Developers and funders should consider opportunities to decrease community-based farmworker housing rental costs further. We also recommend OHCS, and other government agencies, increase support for this type of housing development.

- **Off-farm rural farmworker housing**

We recommend that OHCS and partners work to develop and sponsor off-farm housing in rural areas funded in partnership between public agencies and employers and operated by community-based organizations. This model reduces the conflict of interest and risk of farmworker exploitation inherent in employer-provided housing, allows employers to pool resources to fund housing, and eliminates the need for individual farmers to act as housing developers and managers. In Oregon, Statewide Planning Goal 10 and Exclusive Farm Use (EFU) zoning rules pose barriers to this type of farmworker housing development. We encourage OHCS and partners to work with state and local agencies to change land use regulations or provide regulatory exceptions to allow farmworker housing development off farms in rural areas. We also encourage financial support specifically for this type of housing development.

- **Middle-Housing**

Middle housing includes townhomes, duplexes, triplexes, quadplexes, and cottage clusters. These housing types tend to be more affordable and are in short supply. Cities larger than 10,000 are required to accommodate some or all of these housing types, per Oregon

House Bill 2001. OHCS and partners should encourage farmworker housing developers to pursue these types of housing.

3

Many farmworkers we interviewed described poor housing conditions

Many of the poor conditions described were in on-farm housing. Farmworkers, employers, and agency staff said market rental housing and some farmworker-owned mobile home units are also in poor condition.

Recommendations

- **Increase OSHA inspection of employer-provided housing.** Particularly, OSHA should increase investigation, inspection, and enforcement of housing that is not registered through OSHA.
- **Improve conditions of existing housing:** Increase funding opportunities and outreach for rehabilitation, repair, and replacement of employer-provided housing. The State should consider creating or expanding incentives to support and assist with improvements to farmworker housing, such as tax exemptions or low-interest loans for

rehabilitation of existing housing on farms.

Expand funding for community-based organizations currently providing home repair and weatherization services in counties with high farmworker populations with a requirement to use additional funding specifically for eligible farmworker housing, including rental housing.

Explore ways to preserve and rehabilitate mobile home parks and provide more support for low-income owners of mobile home units to repair their units.

- Offer incentives to rental associations or affordable housing complexes to waive or decrease certain requirements for farmworker applicants such as rental deposit amounts, or to accept OHCS vouchers for farmworkers.
- OHCS and other partner agencies and community-based organizations should provide education to rental housing providers and associations to raise public awareness on the importance of farmworkers and the barriers they face accessing rental housing. This work may help encourage more rental housing to reduce requirements or accept and support farmworker voucher programs.

4

Rental application requirements also prevent farmworkers from being able to access private rental housing

Barriers include the need for a valid social security number, high deposits, rental history, work history, proof of stable employment, income requirements, credit history, and applications only in English. The need for a social security number was mentioned the most.

Recommendations

- Develop a program to provide special clearance, or co-signers, for farmworkers to satisfy these requirements.

5

One in four farmworkers we interviewed said they want to own their own homes but face barriers

They expressed frustration about barriers to the home buying process, including cost, immigration status, and not knowing how to buy a home or where to get help. Farmworkers requested programs to help them achieve homeownership.

Recommendations

- Support lower-cost alternative homeownership models including community land trusts and housing cooperatives that provide ownership opportunities for farmworkers, with the purpose of building wealth and ensuring that housing remains affordable over the long-term for farmworkers.
- Increase support for financial assistance programs to help farmworkers afford to buy homes including low-interest home loans for farmworkers, increased funding for USDA Rural Housing Service programs (Section 502 direct loans), support for farmworker Individual Development Accounts (IDA) matched savings accounts
- Provide or sponsor homebuying classes and individualized coaching for farmworkers. This may include connecting farmworkers to realtors that specialize in helping farmworkers find homes.
- Develop a program to vouch for farmworkers to help them satisfy loan application requirements. Farmworkers face similar barriers applying for home loans as they face applying for rentals. Lack of work authorization was the most mentioned. OHCS and partners should consider programs to vouch for farmworkers to meet these requirements or encourage lenders to consider special requirement waivers for farmworkers.

6

Farmworkers need resources to help them find housing

Employers and agency staff we interviewed also said workers primarily find housing by word-of-mouth, and there is no dedicated resource for farmworker housing information. Farmworkers requested information on available and affordable housing be published somewhere, or to have help from an organization or liaison to help them find and access housing. Some also requested farmworker resource centers to help them access other general support resources and understand their rights.

Recommendations

- Sponsor liaison positions to help connect farmworkers with existing housing and to curate, publish, update, and promote affordable housing information for farmworkers. Farmworkers recommended posting housing information at post offices, community centers, stores, Facebook, flea markets, and Hispanic restaurants.
- Fund development of farmworker resource centers.

7

Employers face many barriers to providing farmworker housing. Agency staff and some farmworkers also described problems with housing tied to employment.

Employer barriers include high cost, difficulty meeting labor housing regulations, and difficulty with local permitting and zoning requirements. Employers who provide farmworker housing usually provide it for free to their workers in addition to their wages. Some farmworkers said they cannot afford to pay for any housing based on their incomes, and that they were afraid to complain about poor housing conditions for fear of losing their jobs or housing. Some agency staff said lack of work authorization can make farmworkers particularly vulnerable to exploitation related to employer-owned housing.

Recommendations

- Consider alternative models to increase housing in rural agricultural areas such as:
 - Off-farm housing near farms funded in partnership between public agencies and employers, and operated by community-based organizations
- On-farm housing sharing models to connect employers with unused or under-used housing with farmworkers or employers in the area that need it.
- Work with OSHA to approve portable temporary housing for certain farmworkers and areas. Examples of this type of housing can be found in the Washington State temporary worker housing tents and FEMA portable housing that is sold at auction when it is no longer needed for emergency use.
- For programs that seek to increase new on-farm housing provided by employers, we recommend:
 - Increase funding and outreach for the AWHTC, especially in Marion, Morrow, and Yamhill Counties where there is less knowledge of this program.
 - Develop a grant program and low-interest loans for farmworker housing to help smaller and beginning farmers access funds to build farmworker housing.
 - Review and update farmworker housing rules collaboratively with employers, rule-makers, and farmworker advocates to find a balance between the rules and what employers are able to provide.

8

Lack of reliable data about farmworkers and their housing

Insufficient data about the number of farmworkers and their incomes makes it impossible to reliably quantify the need for farmworker housing. Quantifying the need for housing is vital to being able to track progress made towards meeting the need, and remaining need, over time.

Recommendations

OHCS and partners may be able to support regular and coordinated data in partnership with government agencies and nonprofits. The data collected should include a count of the number of farmworkers, the number of farmworker households, the number of dependents and total number of persons in a household, farmworker annual household incomes, and information on housing conditions.

Additional County-Specific Recommendations

Each of the counties we studied also has a unique set of conditions that should be considered. These recommendations are based on county-specific observations and should be considered *in addition* to the general recommendations above.

Hood River County

- Create rural farmworker housing higher in the Hood River Valley in smaller towns such as Parkdale and Odell.
- Potential for off-farm housing development in rural agricultural areas funded by employers and government, operated by community partners.
- If farmworker housing is developed in the City of Hood River, a transportation program will need to be included for rides to work.
- Potential opportunity for short-term temporary portable housing rental program.
- Potential for on-farm housing sharing program.
- Workers in Hood River County requested a farmworker resource center to help them understand their rights, connect to housing, and take classes.

Marion County

- Continue to increase farmworker housing in urban centers including Salem, Woodburn, and Keizer.
- Consider development of farmworker specific subsidized housing in rural towns closer to agriculture areas.
- Potential for on-farm housing sharing program.

Morrow County

- Farmworkers said they like the small town feel and community in the town of Boardman.
- Lack of farmworker housing is a significant hardship for employers in Morrow County. Potential for off-farm

housing development in communities funded by employers and government, operated by community partners.

- Due to the current prevalence of RV parks and trailer units, possible opportunity to rehabilitate RV parks and increase homeownership cooperatives allowing farmworkers to access homeownership.
- Farmworkers requested a farmworker resource center in Boardman to educate them of their rights, offer classes, and provide connections to housing.

Yamhill County

- Continue to increase farmworker housing in urban centers including McMinnville and Newberg.
- Consider development of farmworker specific subsidized housing in rural towns closer to agriculture areas.
- Potential for off-farm housing in farming areas funded by employers and government, operated by community partners.