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Migrant housing needs real solution

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The recent closures of three migrant labor camps near Othello couldn't have come at a worse time for the workers or their employers.

The camps were shut down for good reason to be sure -- failing septic systems, questionable water supplies, holes in floors and faulty electrical systems topped the list of violations. No one should live in those conditions.

While housing for laborers moving with the crops and the season always has been a difficult issue and was documented here as far back as 1919, it became more taxing in 1998 when the state Board of Health approved more stringent standards.

Many farmers shuttered their migrant housing as a result. It's expensive for farmers to keep up housing that is used for only a few months each year. As things sit, they tend to deteriorate.

Anyone who has a summer cabin or a winter getaway knows the hazards of a home that sits uninhabited for a portion of the year. Pests, leaks, frozen pipes and aging utility systems are common problems. There always are unwelcome surprises when you open the doors for the first time each season. Migrant housing is no different.

Farmers can't be year-round landlords because that defeats the purpose of seasonal housing. If you have permanent tenants, then you have no place for the influx of workers needed to pick the cherry crop or cut asparagus or pluck fast-ripening fruit from the tree. Successful harvests have a finite window of opportunity and are at the mercy of Mother Nature.

Farmers can't set a date each year for harvest to begin or end. They can't control the weather conditions or timing of the crop. Crops must be picked at their optimum ripeness for packing and shipping.

With most fields and orchards located a good distance from towns with affordable housing, the need for migrant labor camps is evident. Picking conditions are often best early in the morning. And the work rotates across our region as different crops ripen at different times. Crops are ready here at a different time than they are in Chelan or cooler environs.

People need to move with the work and have a reasonable commute to and from the fields from an acceptable place to stay.

The workers in Othello were forced to find other accommodations when the state Department of Health closed the

camps just as the crops were ready to pick. We want to know why Department of Health workers can't take a more proactive approach to what they know is a tricky problem with economic ramifications for workers and employers. Why wait until harvest-time to come in and inspect? Why not conduct some late winter or early spring inspections that would give landlords time to remedy issues before harvest?

Workers formerly living at the Othello camps now have to commute from Mattawa or other locations to get to work. Esperanza, a state-built housing camp using refurbished shipping containers as dwellings near Mattawa, is a shining success in migrant housing but only has 240 beds and was nearly at capacity already. Other camps have been constructed in the Wenatchee area with some success, but they also fill up quickly.

Frustrated workers have taken to camping in tents on public lands, which creates more health hazards and competition with fisherman for camp sites. A colony of tents was set up at Ringold last year during cherry harvest, forcing the Department of Fish and Wildlife to restrict camping to three days per week per person this year.

When Gov. Gary Locke was in office, he declared migrant housing the state's most urgent rural housing need. Esperanza and similar camps opened soon afterward. Current Gov. Chris Gregoire has allocated grant money that could help construct a formal migrant camp in the Ringold area and the state has land nearby that it could develop as part of the project. But some group or nonprofit must take the lead and apply for the grants and manage the project.

Here's what needs to be done: We need a proactive leader willing to take on the challenging issue of migrant housing, work with state agencies to improve relations with landlords and to develop new projects, and push the Department of Health to help get camps up to code before the critical harvest season is upon us.

The livelihood and well-being of many folks, farmers and workers alike, depends on it.

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