

FARM WORKERS NEED FEDERAL HELP NOW (2/06)

President Bush finally has granted some relief to the thousands of farm workers who have been struggling to feed and house their families in the aftermath of the severe cold wave that struck California's farm areas in January. But the aid is far too little and comes far too late.

Bush's action on March 14 came after more than a month of urgent pleading by California's governor, its U.S. senators and many others. It will provide workers \$17 million in food supplies and an extra six months of unemployment insurance payments.

But that's "simply not enough," as President Arturo Rodriguez of the United Farm Workers said. "Families are in a state of crisis. While food donations are critical, federal relief needs to apply toward mortgages and rental assistance and utility payments or thousands of families will lose their homes."

Republican Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger agreed. He urged the Senate Appropriations Committee to quickly approve a bill by Democratic Senators Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein that would provide funds to help workers meet their housing costs.

The workers are victims of a devastating cold wave that plunged temperatures to the low 20s in an area ranging from the Mexican border up through central California. It destroyed at least half the citrus crop and did great harm to several other crops. Damage amounted to more than \$1 billion.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture was quick to offer help to growers by designating 18 counties as "disaster areas." That made the 3,500 growers in those hardest hit locations eligible for low-interest loans of up to \$500,000 each, providing they'd lost at least 30 percent of their crop and could not get loans from private sources or, presumably, crop insurance payments.

In finally granting some relief to farm workers in 12 of the counties, Bush granted more aid to growers – \$10 million to help them prune frost-damaged trees. There hadn't been much federal help, however, for the estimated 12,500 grower employees – 5,000 harvesters and 7,500 packinghouse workers – who were affected. Many have been jobless or working only part-time since January and aren't likely to find much work – if any – until the fall harvests begin in October.

In the meantime, they have little to live on. Farm worker's pay is so low few have savings to tide them over. Lacking steady work, they must rely on government aid and private charity to help them feed, clothe and house their families and cover other essentials.

Citrus worker Guadalupe Florez, a widow and mother of three cited by the United Farm Workers union as typical of those needing help, said she's "started to look for work but there aren't any jobs. All we know is fieldwork and there aren't any oranges to pick, sort or pack. I can get \$118 every two weeks from unemployment benefits but it is not nearly enough to cover my \$742 mortgage and the \$250 in monthly gas and electric bills."

California's state government has helped with unemployment insurance payments and nearly \$6 million in grants to individual workers and county-run food banks. Farm workers can apply for that aid and other help such as health care and job counseling at "one-stop centers" the state has set up in farming areas. Many of the needy workers are undocumented immigrants and thus not eligible for government aid, but non-governmental groups have moved in to help them as well as domestic workers.

Service clubs, churches and others have contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to food banks, and utility companies have reduced their rates in some farming areas. The United Farm Workers has launched a major campaign to spread word of the workers' plight throughout the country, is widely soliciting donations of food and money, and is helping communities organize to take effective action. The UFW calculates that \$32.5 million will be needed just to cover the workers' basic living costs – \$500 a month for at least 10 months for 6,500 households.

But the state and the UFW and other private groups can't possibly meet the enormous need by themselves. The federal government must provide much more than Bush has authorized.

Certainly the farm workers deserve that. As the San Francisco Chronicle noted, "they are part of an economically marginal population that helps drive the state's economy, and allows consumers to buy fruit and vegetables at an enviably low cost."