

# NEW CROP OF HOMES

## *The struggle to house Ventura County's farmworkers*

BY JANE HULSE

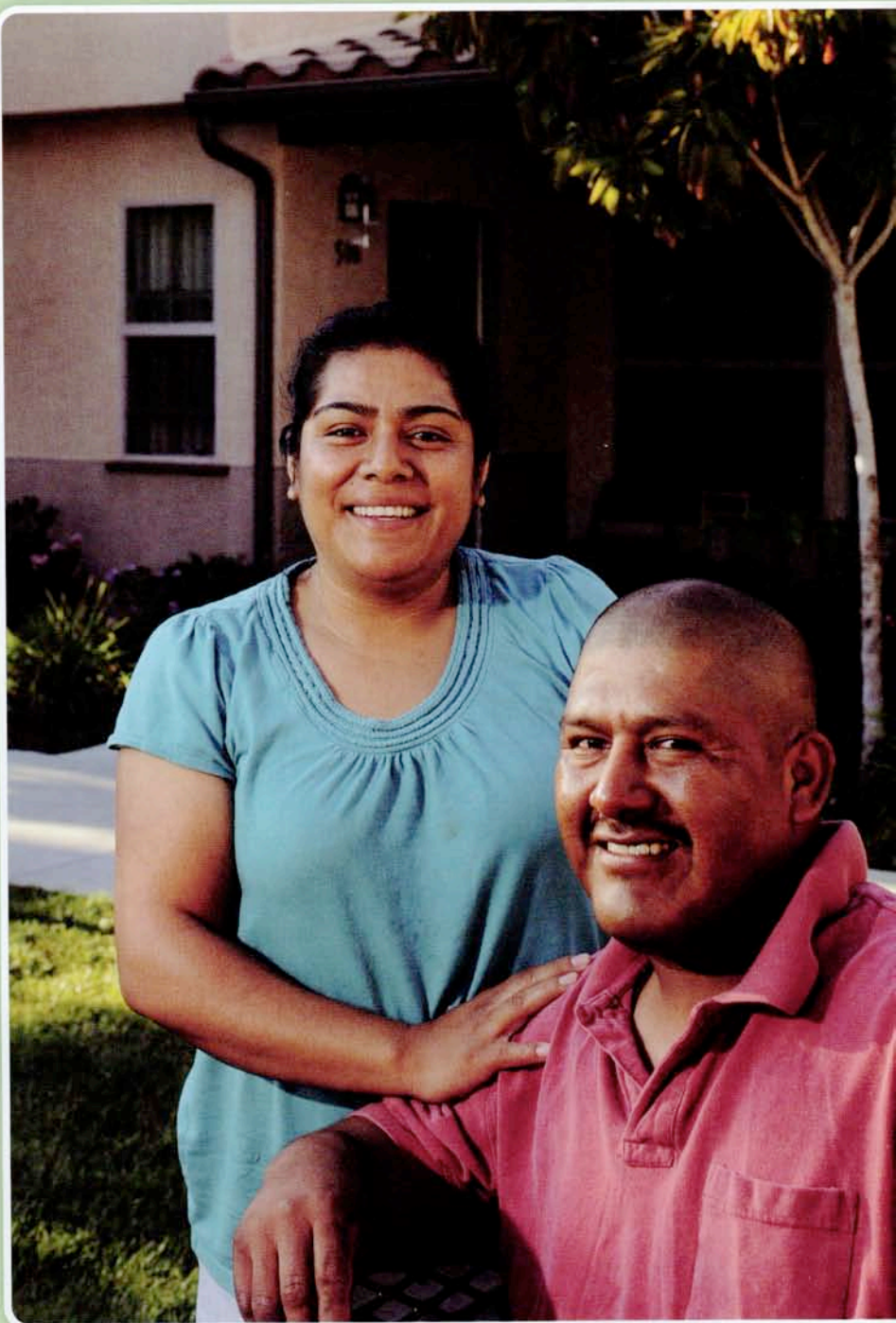
Near the center of tiny Piru, the din of construction fills the air as crews build a cluster of attractive apartment buildings that will eventually become home to 66 farmworker families.

Not only will the families at Valle Naranjal have spacious apartments – up to four bedrooms in some units – but they'll also have a soccer field, basketball courts, a community garden, literacy and computer classes, even health services. The rent: \$1,000 a month for the biggest apartments.

"We've come a long way," Rodney Fernandez, executive director of Cabrillo Economic Development Corp., told a crowd at the groundbreaking for the \$24 million project in February. Since 1981, CEDC has built or rehabilitated 1,400 affordable homes, 636 of them for farmworkers.

Valle Naranjal is among the latest in a flurry of housing developments the group has spawned to help the 17,000 to 24,000 laborers who work the fields of Ventura County's \$2 billion agricultural industry. About 75 percent of them earn less than \$15,000 a year. Affordable housing is out of reach—the average rent in Ventura County is \$1,462 – so many families cram together in unsafe and unsanitary apartments, houses, even garages and sheds.

After a long dry spell, CEDC has been on a roll the last seven years, completing five farmworker housing proj-



Farmworker Donaciano Velasco and his wife Erika live with their three children in a four-bedroom apartment at Cabrillo Economic Development Corp.'s Villa Victoria in Oxnard. Photo by Stephen Osman.

ects. In addition to Valle Naranjal, others are in the pipeline in Santa Paula, east Ventura, and Oxnard. With their completion, the total for the nine will come to 275 new homes.

"We had a great decade," Fernandez said recently during an interview at CEDC's headquarters in Ventura. "But there's a lot to be made up."

He recalls that 35 years ago Ventura County growers provided homes on

their land for about 2,000 farmworkers. By the 1990s most were demolished as liability issues, zoning restrictions and high costs drove growers out of the housing business.

Little by little, CEDC has replaced some of those lost units, but the biggest growth spurt has come in the past decade. During that time, housing money was more readily available through the U.S. Department of Agri-

culture's Rural Development, and two California bond issues, as well as other sources, Fernandez said. The USDA funds subsidize part of the rent so that farmworkers pay no more than a third of their income for rent.

### Ag Futures Alliance Arrives

Fernandez points to Ellen Brokaw as the powerhouse behind the building spurt. Brokaw, who with her husband Hank started Brokaw Nursery in Saticoy 50 years ago, was a founding member of Ag Futures Alliance of Ventura County, a diverse collection of growers, environmentalists, farm laborer representatives and community leaders.

"It was born out of a wish to bring together voices raised stridently in opposition over such issues as pesticides," recalled Brokaw. "It took two years to build trust, then we started to focus on specific concerns."

For Brokaw, the key issue was farmworker housing. By 2002 members had put together a report called "Farm Worker Housing: A Crisis Calling for Community Action." It painted a dire picture of the county's lowest wage earners struggling against extraordinarily high housing costs.

A "housing summit" followed in 2004, where a crowd of 300 watched the Alliance-funded film, "Mi Casa es su Casa," a short documentary that includ-

ed images of 10 laborers crammed in a two-bedroom house and one family with four children living in a tool shed in Camarillo.

Out of the summit grew the Alliance's task force on farmworker housing, which oversees the program, House Farm Workers! The program's leader, Sonja Flores, and her army of volunteers work to convince city officials that the housing is needed and worthwhile.

Her biggest battle, Flores said, is to change the negative perception that farmworker housing will bring down the neighborhood. It does just the opposite, she insists, by adding playgrounds, attractive and spacious homes with plenty of parking, community centers, tutoring for students and ESL classes.

Residents must be U.S. citizens or legally documented – a requirement when federal funds are used in a housing development.

Flores, 35, says the drive to help farmworkers is ingrained in her. Her grandmother and mother worked in the fields and helped other Mexican immigrants with the paperwork to become legal residents.

"Farmworkers go through so much when they come to this country," she said. "They are the backbone of the agricultural industry in Ventura County. Don't they deserve to live in safe, affordable housing?"

### Working in the Fields

Donaciano Velasco works 52 hours a week – Monday through Saturday –

CONTINUED

# From Field to Fork

## A Celebration of Food, Farms and Farmworkers

A fund-raiser to benefit the organization House Farm Workers! is scheduled at the landmark Faulkner Farm near Santa Paula on July 16.

"From Field to Fork: A Celebration of Food, Farms and Farm Workers" will bring together Ventura County farmers and ranchers, chefs and restaurateurs who serve the local bounty, and the farmworkers whose hard work makes it all possible.

The event will be held from 4 to 8 p.m. at the picturesque Faulkner Farm, now the site of the University of California Hansen Agricultural Center, located at 14292 Telegraph Road. It starts out with a tour of the fields and gardens by Master Gardeners, followed by appetizers and wine produced by Ventura County's increasing number of wineries. At dinner, each course will be prepared by a local chef, partnering with a local farmer.

Tickets for the event are \$125, and include all food, wine and entertainment. Tickets may be purchased by mailing a check to Ag Innovations Network, 101 Morris St., Suite 212, Sebastopol, CA 95472. The goal is to raise \$50,000. Tickets can be purchased online at: <https://foodlab.wufoo.com/forms/house-farm-workers-presents-from-field-to-fork/>

House Farm Workers Now! which has promoted the building of farmworker housing since 2004, is a project of the Ag Futures Alliance Farm Worker Housing Task Force. For more information, contact House Farm Workers Now! at 805-486-9665.

### Profile of Farmworkers in Ventura County

Number of farm workers  
17,000 - 24,000

Born in Mexico: 91%

Permanent County Residents: 67%  
Migrants: 33%

Employed year-round: 20%  
U.S. Citizens: 10%

With resident green cards: 33%  
Unauthorized: 57%

Earning less than \$15,000/year: 75%

Source: Work Force Investment Board, The Future of Ventura County Agriculture: Issues and Opportunities for Workers and Growers, [www.wib.ventura.org](http://www.wib.ventura.org), 2006.





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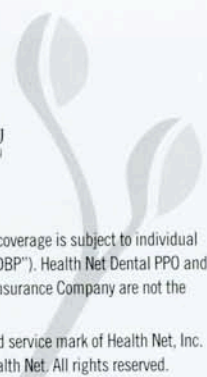


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packing celery for Hiji Brothers in Oxnard. He's worked there 14 years. The son of a farm laborer, he came to the U.S. from Mexico in the early 1990s to help his parents. Then came marriage to Erika and later three children.

For the Velasco family, the move four years ago to CEDC's new Villa Victoria development in Oxnard was literally a move in from the cold. The family lived in a two-bedroom apartment in Oxnard with a broken heater the owner refused to fix.

"It was colder inside than outside," recalled Erika. "It was the worst place I've ever lived." The rent was \$975 a month and didn't include a garage.

At Villa Victoria, the family pays \$932 for four bedrooms, three bathrooms, washer and dryer, and a two-car garage. Upstairs the Velasco children, ages 5, 9, and 13, can study at an oversized desk that came with the apartment. The units face a grassy courtyard with a playground and barbecue area.

"It's very safe for the kids," Erika said.

The Velasco family is fortunate. With the state and national governments struggling with cuts and old funding drying up, money for more affordable housing may be even more difficult to get than it has been.

"The future is going to be much more challenging," Fernandez admits. "The need is not going away; the need is increasing."

But fulfilling the need is also complicated. More than 50 percent of the farm labor force in the county is undocumented, according to one county report, making housing for them a political quagmire. Usually the workers are employed by contractors who supply the growers. Plus, a third are migrant workers, usually single men, who need housing but only at certain times.

The need is also critical in Santa Barbara County. Fernandez said CEDC has tried to make inroads there in the last 10 years but admits it's been "tough sledding. The political will is not there," he says.

However, Peoples' Self-Help Housing, a key provider of affordable housing in Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties for about 40 years, has

managed to add 263 apartments for farmworkers, primarily in Santa Maria and Carpinteria.

### The Role of the Growers

Only a few growers still provide housing on site for their workers. One of them is Leavens Ranches, which houses 16 year-round workers in mobile homes, Quonset huts, and single-family houses. The free housing is a perk that makes for a stable workforce.

"It's a huge benefit but the upkeep is considerable," said Leslie Leavens-Crowe who helps run the family operation. Going back to the old model of grower-provided housing isn't a practical option for today's housing crunch.

"It's prohibitive in about six different ways," she said, for the growers who don't already have it grandfathered in. Besides potential liability issues and taking ag land out of production, it's expensive to build and to navigate all the regulatory hoops required for approval. Beyond that, growers can't provide the services CEDC and PSSH do – after-school care, computers, ESL classes.

One of the biggest unmet needs is housing for the single migrant workers, primarily men. Leavens-Crowe, who is president of the Farm Bureau of Ventura County's board of directors, said there have been discussions with some growers about building dormitory-style housing. But it requires a big capital outlay for an asset that is only used seasonally during harvest and pruning seasons, she said, complicated by regulatory red tape and the touchy issue of where to put it. All that at a time when growers are paying increasingly more for inputs, including water, fertilizer and fuel, as well as regulatory compliance.

Nonetheless, Fernandez says he's "cautiously bullish" about the future. "Little by little, elected officials are seeing our track record for maintenance and well managed (housing) that is an asset to the adjacent neighborhood.

"We have many more successes to point to," he says, "and many more enlightened foot soldiers on the ground."

*Jane Hulse is the editor of Central Coast Farm & Ranch.*

## Limoneira Has Always Housed its Workers

Limoneira, which has a long history of providing housing for its workers, is about to put in some more homes on its historic ranch near Santa Paula.

The company received county approval to add 74 homes, which will bring the total work force housing at the site to 278, according to Alex Teague, Limoneira's senior vice president. Starting with 16 modular units, he expects all the new homes to be up within three years.

Limoneira, which dates back to 1893, started building houses and dormitories for its workers around the turn of the century. It was a way to attract employees, Teague said. By the 1950s, worker homes at the ranch numbered 500.

But the next couple of decades brought tighter government regulations, liability issues and increased

financial burden for Limoneira and other farms that tried to house their workers. By the mid-1990s, Limoneira's housing stock had dwindled to 195.

"We made a decision in 2004," Teague said, after some of the regulations eased up. "We've got the slots – let's go put some back." However, approval for the project was still a long time coming. Once built, the homes will have 1,100 to 1,200 square feet, three bedrooms, and two bathrooms.

About 50 percent of Limoneira's workers live in company-provided housing, paying 52 percent of fair market rent, he said.

Why do it? "It provides a stable force," he said. Average tenure at the company is 26 to 27 years. Plus, "it's the right thing to do."



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