

LOCAL

Where do Ventura County's 36,000 farmworkers live? Officials don't know

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Nearly 20 years ago, Ventura County surveyed farmworker households and their housing needs. The study found that many farmworkers experienced overcrowded housing, lived without adequate bathroom or kitchen facilities, and paid more than a third of their income for housing.

"What came out of that study was some really great data that we have been able to use since then to inform our work with House Farm Workers, and the study really helped engage a lot of people in the community around the need for farmworker housing in a way that hadn't been done before," said Alondra Serna, executive director of House Farm Workers.

The study recommended suitable sites for housing and kicked off activity around farmworker housing. House Farm Workers formed in 2004, and 19 farmworker properties have been completed since then. The county now has 1,995 completed or expected farmworker housing units.

But where do the county's other approximately 36,000 farmworkers live? Officials don't know, according to John Krist, CEO of the Farm Bureau of Ventura County.

"We're supposed to be experts about the farmworker population, but I can't tell you how many farmworkers actually live in the county, exactly where they live, how many of them are permanent full-time workers and how many are here with their families," said Krist, who also serves on the board of House Farm Workers.

"These are all critical pieces of information to foster policies and programs to actually serve this population. That's why we're proposing that the county undertake a similar survey from 20 years ago."

Monterey County study held up as model

House Farm Workers is an advocacy organization focused on building political support for farmworker housing. The organization does not build farmworker housing, but works to reduce regulatory barriers and conducts public outreach on the need for farmworker housing.

The organization is proposing a new study modeled after one recently conducted in Monterey County for the Salinas Valley and Pajaro Valley. On Feb. 28, a representative from the city of Salinas presented an overview of their project at a House Farm Workers Task Force meeting.

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The Salinas study was proposed in the City of Salinas Draft Housing Element in 2015 and completed in 2018. Ventura County's 2002 study similarly began as part of the county's 1998-2005 Housing Element.

The Salinas study found frequent overcrowding, according to Jennifer Coile, retired contract program manager with the city of Salinas. Most farmworkers lived with high rates of overcrowding above two people per room and often with more than five people sharing one bathroom. Coile estimated that the region's 90,000 farmworkers live in a total of 20,000 to 30,000 dwelling units, frequently with three families sharing a one-bedroom unit.

The study found the Monterey County region needs an additional 45,560 units of farmworker housing to alleviate overcrowding. Currently, about 7% of farmworkers in the region have access to subsidized housing. According to the study, 5,372 units of permanent affordable farmworker housing are needed just to maintain this access rate.

Salinas created an action plan with a goal of producing 5,300 farmworker housing units in the next five years, with recommendations for housing types, financing and regulatory reform. Since 2018, 95 units for year-round workers and 175 units for seasonal workers have been completed in the region, with over 200 additional units currently in development.

Serna hopes a similar study in Ventura County could provide more information on farmworker housing needs.

"2002 is quite a long time ago in terms of having accurate data. What we're hoping for is some accurate scientific data around farmworker population and farmworker housing needs that will not only inform our advocacy groups around affordable housing, but also the

agricultural industry, housing developers, and city staff to do a better job to make sure this vulnerable population's needs are addressed," she said.

The majority of current farmworker housing projects were completed in recent years. Cabrillo Economic Development Corporation manages 11 farmworker housing communities and currently has a 42-unit project in the pipeline in Oxnard.

Luz Soto, director of property management for Cabrillo Economic Development Corp., says each property has its own waiting list ranging from 50 to 350 applications. Soto believes there's still a need for more farmworker housing.

"From our experience, most families come from living in garages, living with relatives, sharing homes with other families to be able to pay the rent, many living in substandard conditions and many paying over 50 percent of their income on rent," she explained.

Large farmworker housing project planned

In addition to CEDC's properties, a project currently in the planning stages just outside of Camarillo would provide 360 farmworker housing units. The Somis Ranch project would be the largest farmworker housing development in Ventura County.

Farmworker groups don't know how many units are still needed, according to Serna.

"That's why a study like this could be really helpful in determining that number," she said. "It is information we should know and have the data for but we just don't know."

House Farm Workers is in discussion with the Ventura County's planning division as the county prepares its draft Housing Element for 2021. House Farm Workers wants the study to be included as a program in the Housing Element. Tricia Maier, long range planning manager for Ventura County Resource Management Agency, says it is up to the Board of Supervisors to review the draft and determine which programs the county will pursue.

Maier says the county is already working to increase affordable housing and notes that even if the county doesn't pursue its own study it can still follow recommendations from the Salinas study.

"The county's been proactive in trying to reduce our development standards for new farmworker housing complexes and trying to remove regulatory hurdles to building

farmworker to make it easier, because we agree they need safe and affordable housing," she said.

"Part of the Salinas study was the survey, and the second part was creating action items, and of course we have looked at those action items and will evaluate those to consider if any of those are appropriate for Ventura County. We don't have to wait for the study to do that."

Maier says it is too soon to say whether the county will do another survey as part of the Housing Element process.

"We're in the infant stages of it so it's hard to say. Was it a great study? Absolutely. Would we love something like that here? Yes. But on the flip side, the cost of the study was \$300,000, and that doesn't include Coile's three years of work, so it is a hefty price tag," she said.

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