



Kurt Ellison

This crude shelter had been only recently abandoned.

# Farm workers live in holes in the ground

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The discovery of farm workers living in holes dug in the earth has mobilized social workers and prompted Monterey County officials to reopen their investigation of a Prunedale property.

About 97 "caves" were located by environmental health division staff Tuesday after they combed the hillsides, strawberry fields and ravines off Blackie Road by Highway 101. The land is owned by James Giacomazzi and leased by seven tenants.

Walter Wong, division chief, said residents, mostly men, lived in the hovels, where plastic was used for walls and meals were cooked, posing a health and safety concern.

"That stuff could really catch on fire," Wong said.

Officials estimate 200 people, farm workers employed in adjoining fields, made their homes on the land. They are generally in their 20s and 30s and natives of Oaxaca and Michoacan. Some of them are Indians from Mexi-

co and don't speak Spanish, said Darryl Nacua, migrant farm worker staff attorney for the Salinas-based California Rural Legal Assistance.

The workers came to the attention of CRLA, which is compiling wage claims for about 30 of them, last April. Nacua said CRLA staff members provided informational leaflets to workers spotted running across Highway 101 to a grocery store on the other side.

The unhealthy conditions at the camps surpass those in the case of Jose Ballin, a Long Valley Road rancher who was convicted in 1985 of operating an unsafe labor camp after workers were found living in caves on his land.

"This is the worst I've seen," Wong said.

No toilets were available on site and, as far as Wong could tell, neither was drinking water. Workers used irrigation water from the fields.

Department of Social Services staff members, who have provided residents with vouchers to

purchase food and bottled water at the Prunedale Safeway store, are lining up housing and transportation for workers.

"We're looking at every possible option," said Carmen Domingo, homeless services coordinator.

She said a vacant labor camp is the first choice, so the group can stay together and be more easily transported to the strawberry fields on the Giacomazzi property.

Through the county's general assistance fund, a onetime payment of \$75 per person is available to offset expenses.

"We have \$15,000 to work with in this situation in terms of housing and transportation," Domingo said.

Workers have told authorities they don't earn enough to pay shelter costs.

"It looks like a lot of them were making below minimum wage," Nacua said.

Some of Nacua's clients were paid \$20 to \$40 a week and

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promised the remainder at the end of the season, an agreement in conflict with a state law mandating agricultural workers be paid at least twice a month, he said.

Wong said he will compile a report to present to the district attorney listing sewage conditions, substandard housing and the other "multiple" violations on the land.

It won't be the first time the property has come under scrutiny.

A report on housing conditions on the Giacomazzi spread was brought before the District Attorney's office last June, but was sent back for followup, said Assistant District Attorney Klar Wennerholm. Following a meeting of department heads at North County Supervisor Marc Del Piero's Castroville office yesterday, District Attorney Dean Flippo announced he will assign an investigator to the case.

Wong said his staff received complaints on the property as far back as 1987. During a Tuesday morning inspection behind 17308 Blackie Road, it was evident camps were in use throughout the steep hillside in previous months.

Domingo Vasquez, who lives in a cabin by the road, said scores of men had traversed the well-worn trails until several months ago.

Even now, people drive up to check the mail at the solitary mail box alongside the road, he said.

The Giacomazzi land, alternately shrouded in oaks and planted in strawberries, years back was used for cultivating hay, barley and wheat, said Jim Giacomazzi's sister, who wouldn't give her name.

The woman, who noted, "I know my father wouldn't go along with this kind of stuff," expressed ignorance of the living situation "across the whole highway from us."

Reached after a lengthy hike, the camps in the last two nights have been visited by authorities and private citizens. One Salinas merchant provided bedding for residents.

"They're staying warm and comfortable while they're out there," Domingo said.