

# Growers accused of abusing workers

By LARAMIE TREVINO

STAFF WRITER

A lawsuit that could seek millions of dollars on behalf of as many as 200 farm workers who say they were cheated on their wages and were victims of abuse by two Watsonville-area strawberry growers was filed yesterday in Monterey County Superior Court.

In addition, Lydia Villarreal, an attorney for California Rural Legal Assistance, obtained a temporary restraining order to keep brothers Jose and Manuel Salazar from threatening the farm workers, or reporting them to the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Villarreal seeks back pay and punitive damage for the workers.

She said the Salazar brothers have strawberry growing operations in several North Monterey County locations, including along San Miguel Canyon and Elkhorn roads.

Villarreal said in the suit the workers, most of whom are illegal residents, were threatened with guns when they inquired about their wages.

Promised \$4 an hour, the plaintiffs said their weekly paychecks came to \$20 to \$40 after

working 12 hours a day, seven days a week.

In the strawberry fields where they worked, her clients allege they were denied drinking water and were offered water from a truck radiator or beer at \$1 a bottle to quench their thirst.

"Some of them (farm workers) sucked water out of irrigation pipes" when they were thirsty, Villarreal said.

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

Villarreal, an attorney with CRLA for seven years who last spring won a settlement for Monterey County farm workers found living in caves, said from 70 to 90 workers lived in a two-bedroom house near Pajaro which had no heat or electricity. She said many of the workers were smuggled across the border from Mexico by the Salazars.

The house "only had icy-cold water in the morning that the workers think was irrigation water," Villarreal said.

The workers paid \$25 a week per person to live at the Hill Road house, she said.

Although for years Villarreal said she has been hearing of abuses by the Salazars, she said

she was shocked to find "thing after thing" come to light after farm workers approached her with their complaints in April.

"The totality and enormity of the problem is so outrageous," she said.

She said the core group of 22 farm workers who sought her help in April were joined in the complaint by their replacements, who arrived in July.

Those workers were recruited mainly in Jacona, Michoacan, Mexico, and were having most of their pay deducted to cover everything from the cost of transporting them to work to the amount the Salazars demanded for smuggling them into this country, Villarreal said.

"A number of the clients say they've been pushed and shoved to the ground," Villarreal said.

"There's been an incredible amount of physical and psychological violence and abuse," she said.

Villarreal said that in a court appearance scheduled for Oct. 23 she will seek to extend the temporary restraining order signed by Superior Court Judge E.J. Leach.

Neither of the Salazars could be reached for comment.