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**Washington Rancher and Western Range Association
Agree to Settle Workers' Charges of Abuse and Exploitation**

YAKIMA, WASHINGTON – Sheep rancher Max Fernandez and the Western Range Association (“WRA”) have settled a federal lawsuit brought by three workers charging Fernandez and WRA with wage violations and accusing Fernandez of violations of federal labor trafficking laws. The settlement provides the workers with a total of \$110,000, covering their unpaid wages, damages from the trafficking violations, and attorney fees.

“This lawsuit achieved an important goal by holding both a major association of agricultural employers and one of its members jointly accountable,” noted Weeun Wang, director of litigation for Farmworker Justice in Washington, D.C. “This should add significantly to the association’s interest in making sure that its members comply with labor and employment laws.”

WRA is an association of over 200 sheep ranchers, including Fernandez, who employ foreign workers as shepherders under the federal government’s H-2A temporary agricultural “guestworker” program. In this case, WRA recruited the workers in Chile, brought them into the United States as H-2A workers, and assigned them to work for Fernandez to herd sheep on the range.

Under special H-2A rules for range shepherders—who are also not protected by federal minimum wage laws—the workers were paid just \$750 per month, regardless of how many hours they worked. But rather than herding sheep on the range, the workers spent long, hard days without time off, performing ranch work such as cutting hay, feeding animals, maintaining equipment, and building farm structures. For this work they should have been paid at much higher minimum hourly wage rates required by federal law and their H-2A employment contracts. The settlement compensates each worker for the wages that he should have been paid.

In addition, the lawsuit alleged that Max Fernandez committed labor trafficking offenses by isolating the workers at the ranch, threatening them with deportation if they did not obey orders, and at times confiscating their passports and immigration papers. Federal law prohibits employers from using such tactics to keep workers in fear of leaving their jobs. Under the settlement, each worker will recover monetary damages for these alleged abuses.

While neither Fernandez nor WRA admitted liability, the agreement allows them to avoid an upcoming jury trial. The judge handling the case had already issued legal rulings making WRA jointly responsible for all wages found at trial to be owed to the workers, and rejecting Fernandez’s attempt to dismiss the trafficking claims.

“Wage theft and other worker abuses are far too common in agriculture,” said Michele Besso, an attorney with the Northwest Justice Project who, along with attorneys with Farmworker Justice, represented the workers. “Workers who labor under arduous conditions to put food on the nation’s dinner tables deserve better. These workers stepped forward in the hopes that more employers will

understand they will be held accountable if they fail to pay their workers a legal wage, violate labor trafficking laws and fail to treat their workers with dignity.”

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Northwest Justice Project is a nonprofit organization providing civil legal assistance and representation to low income persons in need throughout the state of Washington.

Farmworker Justice, based in Washington, D.C., is a nonprofit organization that seeks to empower migrant and seasonal farmworkers to improve their living and working conditions, immigration status, health, occupational safety and access to justice.