

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
March 23, 2012

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Farmworkers and Advocates Sue California Onion Grower Over Labor Abuses

Federal Lawsuit Charges Large Southern California Employers With Wage Theft, Health and Safety Violations

BRAWLEY, CALIFORNIA - California Rural Legal Assistance Inc. (CRLA), Farmworker Justice, and the law firm Nava & Gomez filed a federal lawsuit today on behalf of two migrant farmworkers seeking to create change and recover damages for wage theft and other labor abuses suffered by hundreds of farmworkers at the hands of an onion grower and the grower's labor contractors in California's Coachella Valley.

The lawsuit claims that the grower, Calandri SonRise Farms, along with a number of its contractors, subjected the workers to extreme unsafe and unhealthy conditions in its Los Angeles County and Riverside County fields; and routinely underpaid the workers by manipulating their time records and paystubs, and by failing to reimburse them for the tools they need to plant, harvest, and pack the onion crop. The workers were made to live in squalid, makeshift camps on the edges of the onion fields; workers in SonRise's onion fields resorted to bathing in irrigation reservoirs and other unsafe places because their employer-provided housing lacked running water or adequate toilet facilities.

The lawsuit, filed in a federal court in Riverside, charges SonRise Farms with multiple, related violations of federal and state law. The case includes a collective action under the federal Fair Labor Standards Act for minimum wage violations, as well as an action under California's Private Attorney General Act that allows the two plaintiffs to seek relief not only for themselves but for their co-workers who suffered similar labor abuses.

The workers and their allies also charge the grower with violating the federal guarantees of the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act regarding wage payment; record-keeping; and health and safety standards, as well as state laws governing minimum wages; farm labor contracting; employee housing; and unfair competition.

"These two workers have stepped forward," said Megan Beaman, a CRLA attorney representing the workers, "but there are thousands more like them who face the same abuses on the job every day. Growers who play by the rules shouldn't have to compete with employers like SonRise who try to help their bottom line by breaking the law. To do so at the expense of the health and safety of hardworking farmworkers is just inexcusable."

Founded in 1966, CRLA's mission is to fight for justice and individual rights alongside the most exploited communities of our society. Through a network of regional offices in 21 California cities and communities, CRLA provides legal services to over 40,000 people annually through specialized programs focusing on the needs of farm workers, housing, environmental justice, education, individuals with disabilities, immigrant populations, LGBT rights, and women, children and families. For more information on CRLA, please visit: www.crla.org.

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.

Nava & Gomez is a private law firm based in Oxnard, California.

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