

For Immediate Release:

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Farmworker Advocates Say Contractor Preyed on Homeless Men,

Lent them Drug Money at 100% Interest, Left them Penniless When the Season Ended

HASTINGS, FLORIDA – Florida Legal Services and Farmworker Justice filed a federal lawsuit today on behalf of two farmworkers who were victims of labor trafficking and other violations of federal and state labor laws while employed in 2009 and 2010 by Bulls-Hit Ranch & Farm, a potato grower in Hastings, Florida.

The complaint alleges that Bulls-Hit's labor contractor, Ronald Uzzle, recruited drug-addicted men from homeless shelters in urban Jacksonville, Florida, to form work crews for Bulls-Hit's potato packing operations. According to the complaint, Uzzle took advantage of the workers' drug dependencies to provide Bulls-Hit with a compliant and low-cost workforce, and that as joint employers of the workers, both Uzzle and Bulls-Hit are liable for having cheated them of the wages and for damages resulting from violations of federal trafficking laws and migrant agricultural worker protection laws. Federal labor trafficking laws prohibit the procurement and exploitation of a person for labor through the use of force, fraud, or coercion.

"This lawsuit exposes deeply disturbing labor practices that should have no place in modern agriculture, but that all too sadly are still employed by the most unscrupulous employers," said Bruce Goldstein, President of Farmworker Justice, a leading advocacy group for the rights of farmworkers.

Bulls-Hit was also sued in 2004 when using a different labor contractor for similar abuses, including preying on vulnerable homeless workers, feeding their drug addictions, and driving them into debt.

The new complaint alleges that the contractor took the workers to a squalid, overcrowded labor camp, where they were supplied with decrepit housing, illegal drugs, and credit to make drug and other camp purchases at interest rates of up to 100 percent. When the workers received their pay each week from Bulls-Hit, money was taken from their wages to pay for their rent, food, and weekly debts. As a result, the workers were left in a constant state of destitution, indebtedness, and undue dependency on their employers. Workers were afraid for their safety if they tried to leave while still indebted, and effectively indentured to their work for Bulls-Hit.

Filed in a federal court in Jacksonville, the suit charges Bulls-Hit and Uzzle with violations of the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act and minimum wage provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act. The case also includes a class action on behalf of all Uzzle and Bulls-Hit workers who suffered violations of the federal Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act regarding wage payment, record-keeping, and health and safety standards, as well as state minimum wage laws.

“Bulls-Hit is now a repeat offender and clearly failed to learn its lesson last time,” said Weeun Wang, one of the attorneys representing the workers. For their part, the farmworkers say that they hope their lawsuit will deter other employers and contractors from using similarly despicable labor practices.