

Mexico's apple growers say US trade policy hurting their livelihood

SPOKANE, Wash. – Five apple growers from northern Mexico paid a visit to their counterparts in western Washington and spoke to Catholic parishioners in the Spokane Diocese about their efforts to make a better living for themselves and local workers so they can stay home and not flee to the U.S. for jobs.

The growers, from the state of Chihuahua, are members of Frente Democratico Campesino, a cooperative working with Catholic Relief Services to start Un Mercado Justo, a project that shares profitable and sustainable practices with Mexican growers.

According to CRS, the U.S. bishops' overseas relief and development agency, the cooperative aims "to help apple growers develop the skills and technology they need to make a living wage and resist the economic pressure to migrate."

CRS sponsored the growers' visit June 13-19. They went to Broetje Orchards in Walla Walla, which is involved in their project, and they spent two evenings talking to parishioners, introducing themselves and explaining their organization.

They were accompanied by Chuck Barrett, a program director for CRS in Mexico, who served as interpreter.

The Mexican growers all agreed that the main reason their fellow citizens often enter the United States illegally is because they can't earn a living wage in their own country and need work.

They said the Mexicans' situation can be directly attributed to U.S. economic policies, especially the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, known as NAFTA, which they said created a trade imbalance between the U.S. and Mexico.

Jesus Emiliano Garcia, the main spokesman for the group, explained that agricultural products from the U.S. are sold so inexpensively in Mexico because of the U.S. government's big subsidies to American growers.

Mexican farmers can't afford to compete, he said, and wages for agricultural labor in the U.S. are much higher than in Mexico. As a result, he said, Mexican growers produce at a loss and often end up leaving their land and feel compelled to come to the U.S. to find work.

So, the "immigration problem" in the U.S., he said, is a direct result of its trade policies.

With help from Washington state apple growers such as Broetje Orchards, Frente Democratico Campesino tries to help Mexican farmers compete on a more equal footing with U.S. imports.

For example, apple growers on small farms in Mexico have been unable to get credit, so they cannot afford cooling systems or transportation for what they produce. So in turn, the visiting growers said, they have no access to the high-quality apple market in their own country because it is dominated by inexpensive apples from the U.S. and China.

By the end of the growing season, the Mexican apple growers are desperate for income and end up at the mercy of middlemen - called "coyotes" - to whom they must sell their apples for extremely low prices.

Frente Democratico Campesino through Un Mercado Justo lends about 120 farm families an amount equal to the average price paid by the middlemen - about 18 cents per pound - so they can earn back their costs and not have to sell to the middlemen. The families then store all their apples together in a cooling facility financed by the cooperative until apple prices increase.

Currently, with the net price for apples up, the farmers have received as much as 51 cents per pound, which allows them to pay back their loans and still have enough money to reinvest for the next growing season.

This year the farm families in the cooperative plan will be able to sell 624 tons of apples at prices that allow them to support their families in their own country.