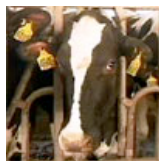


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By: Bill Lambdin



ALBANY - Local farm workers may soon be able to put in for overtime. The state Legislature is thinking about giving farm workers the same rights as most other employees in New York.

The hours are long. The pay is low. That's the image many have of farm workers. The question some are asking is why?

On the Ooms family dairy farm in Kinderhook there's always work to be done. The 400 Holsteins expect to eat every day and almost all of them also need to be milked. Doing all that's necessary is a big job for Eric Ooms, his two brothers, his father and the four people who work with them.

Ooms doesn't want the state Legislature affecting that by passing the Fair Labor Practices Act.

"I think we have a lot of concerns. First of all, they're going to require overtime for work over 40 hours. Agriculture, much like domestic workers and other segments, have had an exemption from that," Ooms explained.

Ooms think more labor intensive types of farming, like apple growing, would be even more affected if the farm workers bill passes.

The bill expected to be voted on this week in the Assembly has been pending for 15 years in New York. The state Senate is also likely to consider it.

The measure would extend the same basic rights most workers already have to farm employees. They could unionize if they wanted. They'd be allowed at least one day of rest per week. They'd be eligible for unemployment insurance and workers comp. They'd also be entitled to overtime after eight hours worked in a day.

"People that have been waiting many, many years and fighting and marching in the winter and in the spring and in the summer for equal rights for farm workers and we think that this is the year that it will finally be realized," said Jordan Wells of the group Justice For Farm Workers

Although the interviewees referred to overtime after 40 hours in a week, the bill available on the Assembly website Wednesday is even more stringent -- requiring overtime after eight hours worked in a day.

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