

USDA EXPANDS HOUSING FOR TEMP FARMWORKERS: The Agriculture Department issued guidance Tuesday on how it plans to handle expanded eligibility for housing assistance it provides to temporary farmworkers. The 2018 omnibus spending bill mandated that workers admitted to the U.S. on a temporary basis — such as through H-2A visas — be eligible to live in housing financed by the department under its Farm Labor Housing program, which provides subsidies to help house farmworkers across the country.

Employers of H-2A workers are required to provide housing, and H-2A workers were not previously allowed to be covered by the program. Applications are due Aug. 27. Rep. Dan Newhouse (R-Wash.) offered the rider for the changes in an attempt to address labor scarcity and improve employers' access to guest workers.

The bill slightly increased funding for the program, but it's not yet clear whether there will be additional demand for these units immediately, or whether the additional funds will be enough to meet any increase in demand, according to the Housing Assistance Council, a nonprofit that researches rural housing issues.

Farmworker Justice President Bruce Goldstein, whose organization opposed the legislation, said that the change is likely to encourage more employers to participate in the H-2A guest worker program and spread thin housing subsidies that can't afford to be stretched. The H-2A program has grown steadily in recent years: According to DOL data, H-2A visas increased 15 percent in 2017 and this year is on track to at least match that.

"There are many farmworkers who are living outdoors in cars, in garages and many other places," Goldstein said. "Any available subsidies to develop farmworker housing should be used to address the shortage for U.S. farmworkers and their families. Given that there is very little money available to subsidize the development of farmworker housing, what little funding is available should be used to address the critical shortage."

USDA, in its guidelines, said that "under no circumstance" may any tenants in USDA-financed housing "be displaced from their homes as a result of this statutory change." As of September 2017, a total of 46,872 people were housed under the USDA program.