

Panel on Demand for Farm Labor Housing

Sponsored by the U.S. Government Accountability Office
and Convened by the National Academies
500 Fifth Street NW, Room 105
Washington, DC 20001

Wednesday, October 13, 2010

8:00 a.m.	Breakfast in meeting room
8:30 a.m.	Welcome and overview of GAO's study and goal of this panel Andy Finkel, GAO
	Introduction of panelists and overview of meeting format and procedures Walter Vance, Panel Moderator
9:00 a.m.	Discussion Session 1: Past, Current, and Future Trends in the Demand for the Department of Agriculture's Farm Labor Housing Loan and Grant Program <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduced by session co-moderator: Amy Radovich, GAO
9:45 a.m.	Questions and Answers
10:00 a.m.	Break
10:15 a.m.	Discussion Session 2: Factors That Most Influence Changes in Demand for the Farm Labor Housing Loan and Grant Program <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduced by session co-moderator: Kim Cutright, GAO
11:45 a.m.	Questions and Answers
12:00 p.m.	Lunch
1:00 p.m.	Panelists respond to written questions
1:10 pm	Discussion Session 3: Looking Forward—To What Extent Is the Farm Labor Housing Loan and Grant Program Positioned to Meet Current and Future Demand? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduced by session co-moderator: Julie Trinder, GAO
2:45 p.m.	Questions and Answers
3:00 p.m.	Panelists respond to written questions
3:05 p.m.	Break
3:15 p.m.	Wrap-up Discussion
3:30 p.m.	Adjourn

Demand for Farm Labor Housing

Introduction

Farm laborers play an important role in the nation's agricultural sector. However, some research suggests that these workers frequently are the most poorly housed people in the United States, often found living in tents, shacks without running water, or crowded, poorly built dormitories. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Farm Labor Housing (FLH) Loan and Grant Program (Section 514/516) provides capital financing to buy, develop, improve, or repair housing for domestic farm laborers employed on farms or in associated handling or processing industries off-farm. The FLH program is the only federally assisted source of housing dedicated to farm labor, which is defined as service(s) associated with the spectrum of farming activities, from cultivating the soil to transporting the goods to market. Since it began in 1962, the FLH program has provided more than \$1.2 billion in funding to develop housing for farm laborers. Today the FLH program has about 720 active properties with more than 16,000 units and a loan portfolio balance of around \$300 million. However, with an aging portfolio, changing labor needs in the agriculture industry, and changes in the demographics of farm laborers the continued demand for these properties is unclear.

The goal of today's panel is to explore the (1) past, current, and future trends in the demand for farm labor housing and for the FLH program, (2) factors that most influence changes in demand for farm labor housing in general and for the FLH program, and (3) the extent to which the FLH program is positioned to meet current and future demand. The panel discussion will inform GAO's study of the FLH program. GAO expects to issue a report on this program next spring.

Session 1: Past, Current, and Future Trends in the Demand for the Farm Labor Housing Loan and Grant Program

45 Minutes (9:00-9:45 am)

In this session, we would like to focus on the demand for farm labor housing and the FLH program and how it has varied over time. We are interested in collecting information on demand for the FLH program from two perspectives: (1) demand for housing units from prospective and current tenants (for example, farm, processing or aquaculture laborers) and (2) demand for development funds from prospective and current borrowers and grantees (for example, housing developers, farmers, nonprofits, and state or local government entities) that build, rehabilitate, or develop farm labor housing units. As part of this discussion, we also would like to gather contextual information on demand for farm labor housing in general. Further, we wish to examine any differences in demand as it varies across geographic region and according to commodities produced, as well as how it may have changed over time. Finally, we would like to explore the availability and quality of data on the demand for farm labor housing in general and in the FLH program.

Please hold any comments about the causes of demand until the next discussion session.

Questions to panelists:

- What is the current and projected demand for farm labor housing in general from potential tenants, how is it measured, and has it changed over time (since the beginning of the FLH program in 1962)?
- What is the current and projected demand for FLH program units from potential tenants, how is it measured, and has it changed over time (since the beginning of the FLH program in 1962)?
- What is the current and projected demand for funds to build or rehabilitate FLH housing from potential borrowers and grantees, how is it measured, and has it changed over time (since the beginning of the FLH program in 1962)?
- What data sources are available to measure demand for farm labor housing? Are there any limitations to these data?

Session 2: Factors That Most Influence Changes in Demand for the Farm Labor Housing Loan and Grant Program

90 Minutes (10:15- 11:45 a.m.)

In this session, we would like to focus on the factors that most influenced past, current, and future demand for the FLH program both among prospective or current tenants and prospective or current borrowers and grantees. As part of this discussion, we also would like to gather contextual information on factors that most influence demand for farm labor housing in general.

Among prospective tenants, a variety of factors could influence demand for units, but we wish to focus on the ones that most influence demand. Such factors could include the need for farm labor and program eligibility requirements. We want to explore the extent to which the identified factors vary among geographic regions, commodity, availability of agricultural technology, length of harvest season, and scale of agricultural operation. Among prospective borrowers and grantees, a variety of factors may affect program participation, including the availability of funds, program requirements, and other financial considerations. As with the factors influencing tenant demand, we would like to focus on the factors that most influence demand among borrowers and grantees.

Questions to panelists:

- For prospective and current tenants, what factors most influence demand for farm labor housing in general and the FLH program in particular?
- For borrowers and grantees, what factors most influence demand for funds to develop new FLH program properties?
- To what extent, if at all, have FLH program requirements affected demand?
- How have these factors varied across geographic regions and over time?

Brain - length of season
Cool 150 days + 174-2007 200,000 → 400,000

Water / ground

River, Wharfe
ground / water

Drainage is a factor
in the north

Session 3: Looking Forward—To What Extent Is the Farm Labor Housing Loan and Grant Program Positioned to Meet Current and Future Demand?

90 Minutes (1:10 – 2:45 p.m.)

In our concluding panel session, we would like to explore the extent to which the FLH program is positioned to meet current and future demand. The program model has not changed substantially since 1962. Given demand trends and the costs of maintaining and improving the program's properties, concerns have been raised about whether the program needs fundamental changes, and more broadly, whether the federal government should change how it provides assistance for farm labor housing. The discussion during this session should focus on whether the current model is working and what changes, if any, are needed to the program model in light of the current and projected demand for units and funds to develop farm labor housing. We also wish to explore other options for providing assistance for farm labor housing.

Questions to panelists:

- To what extent, if at all, does the FLH program meet current and projected demand for farm labor housing?
- What, if any, changes should be made to the program model to better meet the current and projected demand for farm labor housing?
- What, if any, changes should be made to the program management framework to better meet current and future demand for farm labor housing? By management framework, we mean the specific operations, policies, and procedures involved in all aspects of the FLH program.
- Are there other options for providing federal assistance for farm labor housing (outside of the current FLH program) that could be more effective?

Wrap-up Session for Panelists

15 Minutes (3:15 – 3:30 p.m.)

This wrap-up session will be an opportunity for panelists to raise any topics they find relevant or important but that were not addressed in previous sessions and for the team/audience to ask panelists questions.

- Is there anything else that is important for GAO to know or understand about this program?

GAO Study Team

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Panelists

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Peter Carey, Self-Help Enterprises, Inc.
Dennis Harris, Telamon Corporation
Moises Loza, Housing Assistance Council
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