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W.Va. immigrant workers skip boycott

By Joe Morris

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West Virginia's immigrant workers boycotted the nationwide boycott, a reaction that seems to reflect their small numbers as well as the transient nature of much of their work here.

While hundreds of thousands of mostly Hispanic immigrants skipped work on Monday in heavily immigrant states like California and Texas, there were no reports of any boycott activity in West Virginia, said Karl Angel, a spokesman for the state Division of Labor.

There are just under 15,000 Hispanics living in West Virginia, according to the 2004 U.S. Census Bureau data. That figure is up almost 20 percent over the previous four years.

The state's Hispanic population is concentrated in the Eastern Panhandle, drawn there by seasonal farm work as well as permanent positions with the region's chicken processing plants.

But even there, Monday appeared to be business as usual.

"Attendance was normal, production was normal, operations were normal," said Ray Atkinson, a spokesman for Pilgrim's Pride Inc., the state's biggest chicken processor. Its two plants in Moorefield employ about 2,250, and about 20 percent of those employees are immigrants, Atkinson said.

Though the company decided to close some of its plants in Texas because of the boycott, "we didn't have any issues in Moorefield," he said.

The Panhandle's farm industry, meanwhile, was unaffected, mostly because it's off-season for most farm work that attracts immigrant labor, said Karen Hoff, director of the Telamon Corp. immigrant outreach agency in Martinsburg. "We're not hearing anything" about boycotts, she said.

Service industry businesses such as restaurants and salons also tend to attract immigrant labor in West Virginia, Angel said. But the state heard nothing about any of them closing on Monday, he said.

Though it isn't well documented, a growing sector of immigrant labor in West Virginia is construction, particularly in cities such as Charleston, Huntington, Morgantown and Beckley, as well as the Eastern Panhandle, says Steve White, director of the of the Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation labor umbrella group.

"We've been seeing more and more immigrant workers on construction sites over the last three or four years," he said. Nonunion builders are increasingly searching out immigrant labor in order to pay low wages and skirt safety and work regulations while avoiding taxes, licensing fees and other expenses, White said.

When the job is done, the workers move on to another site in another state, he said.

"Nobody really knows how many there are" because the workers tend to be undocumented, White said. "But when I talk to people in the field, they say that on any day they can find one or two immigrant workers on construction sites."

He added: "The people taking part [in the boycott] are taking part in communities, and most [of the immigrant workers] here are not in communities — they're imported."