

Reedley-based Gerawan Farms exits table grape business

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Gerawan Farming, one of the largest growers of tree fruit and grapes in Fresno County, has alerted its employees and government officials that it is shutting down its table grape operations next year, affecting more than 2,500 workers.

The Reedley-based farming company issued a layoff notice, required under both state and federal employment law, on Dec. 18, declaring that the shutdown will take effect on Feb. 25.

Ronald Barsamian, a Fresno attorney for the company, said the vineyards are scattered between Fresno and Kerman. He declined to address how many acres of vines are involved in the decision, but added that the vineyards will be torn out. "They're still going to have a little bit of vineyard, but those will go to the winery, not for table grapes," Barsamian said Wednesday.

A total of 2,551 workers will be affected by the Gerawan shutdown; more than 2,400 of them are represented by the **United Farm Workers** union. Gerawan Farming, the UFW and the state **Agricultural Labor Relations Board** have been engaged for several years in a legal battle over representation of nearly 3,000 of the company's field workers. The UFW won a 1992 election to represent the workers, but no contract agreement was ever reached. In 2012, the union reasserted its right to represent Gerawan workers, triggering a string of union allegations to the ALRB of labor law violations by the farming company and sparking an effort by some workers to decertify the union.

Earlier this year, a state appeals court ruled that the ALRB violated state law by unilaterally imposing a mediated contract on the company; the labor board and the union are appealing that May ruling to the state Supreme Court. In September, an administrative law judge for the labor board recommended throwing out a 2013 election among Gerawan workers to decertify the union – the ballots of which were never counted.

Barsamian said Gerawan's decision to get out of the table grape business and tear out those vineyards has "not a damn thing" to do with the farming company's dispute with the union and ALRB. "Companies like Gerawan don't made decisions like this based on labor organizations," he said.

UFW national vice president Armando Elenes, the union's representative to Gerawan, could not be reached for comment on the company's layoff notice.

The biggest portion of Gerawan's business is tree fruit, Barsamian said, adding that table grapes are a lesser piece of the company's operations. Even so, the company is recognized as a major grower and shipper of table grapes, and a **notice sent by Barsamian to Fresno County Supervisor Henry R. Perea** indicated that the closure will only affect employees who worked in the company's table grape operations, including 1,049 grape pickers, 359 packers, 949 pre-harvest workers and a smattering of other workers.

"The table grape operation closure does not affect any of the employees' employment in other Gerawan farming operations," Barsamian wrote in his letter to Perea.

2,551 workers affected by the Gerawan shutdown

It's not clear how many of the employees also work in other parts of the Gerawan operation. "Some people only work in the grapes, some work in both grapes and trees, and some only work in tree fruit," Barsamian said. "We wanted to send this out as far in advance as possible so the employees could make decisions on what they're going to do next season, and to make clear to workers in tree fruit that their jobs are not affected by this."

A letter sent to the affected table grape workers advises that “on February 25, 2016, you will be permanently laid off from your employment in the table grape operation, which is being fully closed. This only affects your employment in the table grapes, and does not affect any employment you may have had in other Gerawan farming operations.”

Barsamian would not address questions about why the company is getting out of the table grape business – whether it involves aging vines reaching the end of a productive life, a switch to more profitable crops, or a shortage of water for irrigation. On its website, Gerawan Farming boasts about the quality of its Prima brand of table grapes and its proprietary red and [black grape](#) varieties. The company added that its [vineyards are watered by flood irrigation](#), rather than more water-efficient drip irrigation, to promote larger vines and produce grapes that are less prone to shattering.

Winter is primarily an off-season for table grapes. “There won’t even be any pre-harvest activity until maybe March,” Barsamian said. “Table grapes have a very limited harvest-to-marketing period, and the harvest lasts basically about a month each fall,” compared to tree fruit, where harvesting of different varieties begins in the late spring and continues into the early fall.

Throughout Fresno County, about 12,500 acres were planted in table grape varieties in 2014, with total production of fresh table grapes by all growers estimated at 107,000 tons. The total value of the county’s table grape crop was estimated at more than \$174.3 million, according to the 2014 Fresno County Crop Report.

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Layoff notice

Under both the state and federal [Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification \(WARN\) acts](#), employers must provide at least 60 days notice of any closures, mass layoffs or relocations that involve 50 or more employees. The state law requires that notice be provided to employees, the local Workforce Development Board, and the chief elected official of each city and county in which the mass layoffs occur. The federal law additionally requires notice to the employees’ labor representatives and to the state Employment Development Department.