



Civil Rights Department

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Civil Rights Department Files Lawsuit Against Ayoquezco Farms Over Alleged Sexual Harassment of Seasonal Strawberry Picker

Legal action seeks to remedy and prevent alleged pattern of unlawful harassment, discrimination, and retaliation

SACRAMENTO – The California Civil Rights Department (CRD) today announced filing a lawsuit against Ayoquezco Farms and its owner over an alleged pattern of sexual harassment targeted against and directly harming a woman employed as a seasonal strawberry picker. In the lawsuit, CRD alleges that the owner of Ayoquezco Farms, which is headquartered in Watsonville in Santa Cruz County, California, unlawfully subjected the complainant to sexual harassment and a hostile work environment, including by making crude sexual remarks during and after work and brazen sexual assault. On behalf of the individual complainant and as part of the state's interest in combatting civil rights violations, CRD is seeking to remedy and prevent the alleged unlawful sexual harassment, discrimination, and retaliation.

“There is no place for sexual harassment in our state,” **said CRD Director Kevin Kish.** “Whether it’s in an office building or on a farm, we’re committed to protecting the civil rights of California’s residents. Nobody is entitled to use their position of power to degrade, humiliate, and abuse their workers. For those who come forward to report abuse, the California Civil Rights Department will continue to do its part to take action to support you.”

In November 2021, CRD received a complaint against Ayoquezco Farms and its owner alleging sex discrimination, sexual harassment, and retaliation. The alleged harassment began just days after the complainant was hired in June 2018 and the defendant allegedly repeatedly made sexually charged comments over a period of years, culminating in alleged sexual assault in 2021. Pursuant to its statutory authority, CRD investigated the administrative complaint, and determined in 2022 that there was sufficient evidence that the defendant discriminated against and unlawfully harassed the complainant. CRD also found that the company and its owner allegedly failed to take reasonable steps to prevent discrimination and harassment of female employees. When the complainant brought the matter to a supervisor, the defendants allegedly retaliated by escalating the sexual harassment and creating working conditions which were so intolerable that the complainant was forced to resign. Despite these findings, defendants failed to take sufficient steps to remedy the alleged harms and efforts to address the state's concerns through mediation were unsuccessful.

CRD is seeking a range of relief on behalf of the worker, including lost wages, punitive damages, and corrective action to prevent future discrimination, harassment, and retaliation against workers.

Under California law, CRD is authorized to investigate and prosecute violations of the state's civil rights laws, including the Fair Employment and Housing Act (FEHA). FEHA prohibits private and public employers from engaging in discrimination against workers on the basis of sex and other protected characteristics. CRD's authority to take civil action on behalf of individuals and the State of California is a critical part of the state's ongoing efforts to address discrimination in the workplace. Female seasonal agricultural workers in particular remain vulnerable to sexual violence and harassment. For instance, a 2010 study found that 80% of farmworker women surveyed in California's Central Valley had experienced some form of sexual harassment.

If you or someone you know has been the victim of discrimination, CRD may be able to assist you through its complaint process. General information about CRD's complaint process and how to file a complaint is available [here](#). Additional information regarding California's laws against sexual harassment is available [here](#).

A copy of the file-stamped complaint is available [here](#).

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CRD is the state agency charged with enforcing California's civil rights laws. Formerly known as the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH), the mission of CRD is to protect the people of California from unlawful discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations, and state-fund programs and activities, and from hate violence and human trafficking. For more information, visit civildrights.ca.gov.

