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FARMWORKERS GET CABINET SUPPORT

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In an unprecedented effort of cooperation, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman and U.S. Labor Secretary Alexis M. Herman pledged their commitment to local farmworkers last week on a two-day visit to South Dade. The trip was the first stop of a fact-finding mission for the two cabinet members to get information on how to improve the living and working conditions of farmworkers, and to insure a stable and reliable work force. They are expected to take a similar trip to California.

"It's been a very productive time for us," said Herman, during a stop at a child-care center at Everglades Villages, a new rental community run by Everglades Community Association for farmworkers. After the two read a children's story to youngsters at the center Wednesday morning, they met with more than a dozen members of the press. Herman stressed the need to encourage children of farmworkers to do homework and not farm work.

The visit began Tuesday when the secretaries met with farmworkers from South Dade and other Florida regions. They later met with farmworker advocates. Steve Kirk, executive director of Everglades Community Association, said it was important for the secretaries to hear firsthand of the problems facing farmworkers. "Both appeared to be seemingly pretty decent people," he said. "I'm not sure what is going to be developed from a policy perspective. But I think that there was some genuine interest based on the kind of people they are."

The two cabinet members spent part of Wednesday meeting with growers and later toured Redland Farms and Everglades Villages. The visit ended with an unscheduled stop at Harris Field to see a distribution of donated farm products by Farm Share. During their trip, the two secretaries were exposed to a number of issues, including farmworker wages, work conditions and the impact of imported products on local farmers. Glickman said it wasn't clear if such imports are a direct result of the North American Free Trade Agreement, and he himself believes NAFTA has had a positive impact on the country. But he added there are areas of the country "that have been less positively affected" by NAFTA, and said he would take that message back with him to Washington. "It's something that I realize is on people's mind," he said.

Vegetable grower John Alger, who met with the secretaries, said he is glad farmers had an opportunity to respond to the federal officials' concerns, specifically on why it appears some farmworker wages haven't increased in several years. "It was a good exchange. We enlightened them. They came with some concerns. I think their concerns were answered." Mark Wilson, a nursery man who also met with the cabinet members, said he was glad they took the time to come to South Dade. "I'm pleased at least that we're getting some national attention," he said. He wishes they could have seen more of the local industry: "Because of their tight schedule, I'm not too sure that they were able to get the true flavor of agriculture in South Dade, which is very unique from the rest of the continental United States."