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# Mexican laborers, or braceros, are due about \$3,500 each

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CHICAGO — Ramon Ibarra remembers his backbreaking days repairing railroads in the Southwest, a contract job for which he left Mexico in 1942 as part of a guest-worker program. More than 60 years later, he's looking forward to the rest of his paycheck.

Now 86, Ibarra was one of the hundreds of thousands of Mexican laborers, or braceros, who helped the United States meet its labor demands during World War II. They can now apply for money that was withheld from their paychecks in the 1940s and sent to the Mexican government as an incentive for them to return home.

Many of them never saw the money again.

Ibarra, of Chicago, and others like him are entitled to about \$3,500 each, according to a judge's preliminary approval of a multimillion-dollar lawsuit settlement in San Francisco last week.

The terms of the settlement, which does not admit fault, call for the Mexican government to pay braceros or their descendants a total of about \$14.5 million. In addition, U.S. lawyers will receive about \$2.8 million.

But the total payout could change if more braceros step forward before the Dec. 23 deadline to file a claim. The deal is subject to final approval next February.

Chicago attorney Matthew Piers filed the lawsuit against the Mexican government and three Mexican banks, seeking class-action status on behalf of several former braceros, mostly in California, who claim they were unfairly denied wages between 1942 and 1946.

"These are the founding fathers of the Mexican community in the U.S. They were treated abysmally," Piers said Wednesday. "We are very hopeful that finally the braceros are going to get their compensation in the United States."

Starting next week, former workers based in the United States, or a surviving family member, can file a claim at the Mexican Embassy in Washington or Mexican consulate offices. Former laborers must present original paperwork and identification to be eligible. They also must be living in the United States, but they do not have to be citizens.

Messages left Wednesday seeking comment from defense attorneys and the Mexican Embassy were not returned.

An estimated 2.5 million braceros worked in the United States between 1942 and 1964, largely in agriculture. The first group of workers had about 10 percent of their paychecks withheld and sent to the

## LOCAL ANGLE

Alianza Braceroproa, a volunteer coalition working on behalf of former braceros, in 2005 started organizing efforts in Arizona to help the workers recover lost wages.

"This money is owed to the braceros; it is not charity," the organization's Violeta Dominguez said at the time.

That year, the coalition said it had identified nearly 400 braceros living in Arizona.

On the Web

Braceros Lawsuit Settlement:  
[www.casobraceroproa.com](http://www.casobraceroproa.com)

Mexican government.

It is unknown how many former braceros will step forward to apply for the lost money, Piers said. Potentially thousands are still alive, he said.

Locating them might be difficult, a challenge addressed in the terms of the settlement.

Advocacy and marketing groups in Illinois, Texas and California have reached out to communities with Spanish-language ads, a toll-free hot line and a Web site. The U.S. Hispanic Consumer Market, along with other Latino community groups, is focusing on the Chicago area, Houston, San Francisco and San Jose, Calif.

"There are thousands of stories like this," Piers said.

In 2005, the Mexican congress approved a \$26.5 million fund to finally pay the braceros their money. But the government required braceros or the families of deceased workers to file their claims at offices in Mexican state capitals or Mexico City.

Many of the braceros who have been living in the United States for decades took buses to Mexico to make their claims, but thousands were unable to make the trip. Even those living in remote regions in Mexico have struggled to claim their payments.

Applications for the U.S. settlement will go into the claims process immediately, essentially making the same program approved in Mexico in 2005 more user-friendly for braceros living in the United States, Piers said.

Ibarra, originally from the northeastern state of Tamaulipas, read about the settlement in a Spanish-language newspaper in Chicago. He recalled his experiences in 1940s as physically difficult but says, "I was young."

He was recruited in his hometown of Madero to work in Arizona for several months on the rails. He lifted rails and girders during the day and slept in tents at night for almost a year. Eventually, he went to Chicago and worked for the Illinois Central Railroad.

The retired widower, who is a U.S. citizen, believes the settlement money is crucial. He lives off a \$1,400 monthly pension.

"It's very important," he said. "I can buy a lot of medicines that I need."

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