NATIONAL FARM WORKER MINISTRY

FARM WORKERS AND THE ENVIRONMENT: HEAT STRESS

Voices from the Field

Asunción Valdivia, age 53, began working in California's grape vineyards in mid-July 2004 where temperatures reached 104°F. He came up from Mexico to join his son, Luis. They were picking just four rows apart when Asunción collapsed. Other farm workers fanned him and put cool water on him while the crew boss' daughter called 911. The dispatcher was not able to determine their location in the Giumarra Vineyards. Asunción came back to consciousness and the crew boss told his daughter to cancel the ambulance and for Luis to take him home. On the way home Asunción began to foam at the mouth and went limp. By the time Luis got him to the hospital he was dead.

Heat is the leading weather-related killer in the U.S. and even more lethal to farm workers who are working under the hot sun for long hours. Heat has killed more than 780 workers across the country between 1992 and 2016, and seriously injured nearly 70,000. Unfortunately, these are just the reported cases as many do not seek medical care. Death is the most tragic result of heat exposure. Other issues can include headaches, nausea, dizziness, muscle cramps, weakness, irritability, confusion, slurred speech, seizures, and loss of consciousness. Left untreated, heat exposure can progress into acute kidney injuries and heat stroke. Heat exposure can also exacerbate other health problems such as asthma and heart disease.

With accelerating climate change, worker injuries and deaths due to excessive heat exposure are projected to increase in the coming years.

The solutions are simple: access to water, shade and rest. Most employers do not voluntarily provide access to these remedies. Farm workers are often paid by piece rate which discourages them from taking breaks or stopping to hydrate. Luis reported that Giumarra Vineyards required a minimum 15 boxes of grapes be picked before the first break at 9:30 am.

Farm workers often wear long-sleeve shirts to protect them from pesticide and sun exposure, but these further increase their body temperature. Working in fields, many farm workers are in direct sunlight with no access to shade while performing strenuous work, leaving them even more susceptible to heat stress.

Unfortunately the end of the work day is not necessarily the end of the risk of heat stress for many farm workers. Worker housing often does not have air conditioning or fans. Farm workers experiencing heat stress do not have access to remedies, even including water, to lower their body temperatures. A team of nursing staff from Emory University, with support from the Farmworkers Association of Florida, conducted a study in 2018 of heat stress in farm workers across Florida. They found that of the farm workers studied: 43% began the workday dehydrated, up to 72% showed signs of dehydration by the end of the workday; and more than 80% had dangerous body temperatures on at least one day of the three-day study. As temperatures continue to rise across the nation, it is crucial for regulations to be put in place.

Asunción Valdivia's death was preventable. We can anticipate that heat stress illnesses and deaths will continue to grow unless there is an intervention. Heat illness can be prevented by access to training, water, shade and rest breaks. But as many employers will not provide these basic needs voluntarily, federal legislation is needed.

Act!

Support the "Asuncion Valdivia Heat Illness and Fatality Prevention Act" (HR3668) that requires the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to implement a national heat stress standard.

Learn More!

Citations, event planning resources, and links to additional resources; http://nfwm.org/resource-center/harvest-of-justice/

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National Farm Worker Ministry educates and mobilizes people of faith and conscience to support farm worker led campaigns to improve farm workers' working and living conditions.

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