

FARM WORKERS AND THE ENVIRONMENT: WATER, DROUGHT, AND WILDFIRES

Voices from the Field

As wildfires raged in the area around him, Manuel Sanchez Ortiz, 51, sat with his family outside the community center in rural California, which had become a shelter for people fleeing. Born in Mexico, Manuel has worked in the region's vineyards for more than 25 years. Because of the smoke he has already lost two days of work and says it is up to his boss whether he'll be paid or even whether he will continue to work. Near him in the community center was a woman who was worried that the identification bracelet she received there would mark her as an immigrant and wondered if immigration officials might come to get her. At another table, more undocumented workers, not eligible for federal relief were registering for a local fund specifically collected to assist them. Manuel was here last year when farm workers in the area did not lose homes but lost wages and the food in their fridge because of power outages.

Emergency regulations put in place when the fires broke out required employers to check the air quality before and during a work shift. If the pollution rose above a 150 air quality index, then workers should be moved to a location that is safer if possible and if not, provided with masks. To Manuel the masks are troublesome for workers because they are bulky, uncomfortable and hard to wear for very long.

Manuel labored in the vineyard long hours to save the grapes at the peak of harvest. Like most of the other farm workers, Manuel chose to continue to work, whatever the conditions because he and his family need the money.

In the community, residents were told it was not safe to be outside and that they should stay indoors. Manuel and his fellow farm workers continued to labor.

Names have been changed.

As temperatures rise and soil dries out, there is an increase in wildfire activity. In 2018, California wildfires burned more than 1.8 million acres and caused smoke drift for hundreds of miles. What used to be a seasonal issue in the Western U.S. now lasts year round. As the intensity and frequency of wildfires increase so do the risks facing farm workers.

Direct exposure to smoke and heat from wildfires is the initial burden placed on an already tenuous set of consequences. Smoke from wildfires contains chemicals, gases and fine particles that can reduce lung function, worsen asthma and other existing heart and lung conditions. Each health risk is also compounded exponentially by global socio-economic factors. In the U.S., those include lack of immigration status and the criminalization of immigrants. Many are fearful of coming forward for assistance even when eligible. The threat of being separated from their families by detention and deportation keeps farm workers from seeking much needed services.

Unpredictable rainfall results in both drought and flooding, which create job insecurity for farm workers who are already living paycheck to paycheck. Most farm workers do not have paid leave and are not eligible for unemployment, leaving them extremely vulnerable economically. They are often paid by the piece as opposed to by the hour meaning that any time spent away from work results in a income loss. The threat of lost wages also encourages farm workers to work even in hazardous conditions like smoke. The failure of the authorities to provide sufficient notice in locally spoken languages puts farm workers at even higher risks.

Displacement of farm workers from wildfires is also a concern. Many farm workers live in overcrowded subsidized worker housing or low quality rental properties near their work sites. These situations leave farm workers vulnerable to predatory-price gouging tactics that landlords take advantage of in wildfire induced housing shortages.

Farm workers deserve protection from the dire impacts of drought and wildfires.

Act!

Support "The Farmworker Smoke Protection Act of 2019," S. 1815. The bill would help ensure that farm workers are protected from hazardous wildfire smoke by requiring employers to provide certified protective equipment, training, and educational materials.

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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