

National Farm Worker Ministry

FARM WORKERS AND THE ENVIRONMENT: NATURAL DISASTERS

Voices from the Field

The day after Hurricane Florence plowed through eastern North Carolina—Saturday, September 15—Lucinda sat on the couch in her mobile home in Lenoir County and counted out some cash. Calculating how much water and food her family would need, she was prepped to trek through floodwaters to the closest Walmart with her husband. But before she could put shoes on her kids' feet, Lucinda received a text message from a friend.

It was a message people sent around saying that la migra [Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)] was out here," Lucinda—who, along with her husband, works in the food system, processing pork and harvesting field crops—recalls. "One person tells another, and then another, and the advice was to not leave the house."

Photos shared via Facebook and WhatsApp showed Border Patrol trucks in nearby Kinston (purportedly in the Walmart parking lot), spurring confusion and fear among immigrant communities who make up the majority of the region's agricultural workforce. According to the Atlanta office of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency (CBP), the government deployed 12 officers to North Carolina to assist in relief efforts after Hurricane Florence."

Names have been changed.

Hurricanes are the world's costliest natural weather disasters and there is evidence that the unnatural effects of human-caused global warming are making hurricanes stronger and more destructive. This trend will continue as ocean waters continue warming, stoking more frequent and intense storms, costing the agricultural industry in states like North Carolina and Florida billions of dollars. Farm workers whose livelihood is dependent on crops to pick find themselves at the intersection of climate change and living and working conditions.

Hurricanes destroy crops, flooding fields and shortening the work season for farm workers. Farm workers have the lowest annual family incomes of any U.S. wage and salary workers. After so-called natural disasters, farm workers have even less pay and with very few options to find other work. In the U.S., over 242,000 farm workers are guest workers under the H-2A visa program. North Carolina typically has at least 20,000 H-2A workers. Stipulations of this visa require the farm worker to stay with the sponsoring employer, leaving them no way to work when a disaster causes an end to the season.

Farm workers remain the least equipped to prepare for hurricanes and the least able to get out of their way. Farm workers often do not know about the threats of storms, as notices are only announced in English. Farm workers who do know in advance to evacuate fear detention and deportation, keeping them from getting out of harm's way. Just like in the story above, the threat of ICE keeps farm workers from going out to meet their basic needs.

Not only are farm workers at risk of losing work due to storms but also their lodging. Many farm workers live in housing provided by their employers, close to the fields and often in flood plains. Many reside in poorly kept trailers and this sub-standard housing is especially susceptible to damage from storms. For those who own or rent their own housing, finding new housing after a disaster can be extremely difficult. Landlords can charge market-rate rents, though many of those are unanchored or do not meet current safety standards. Year-round leases make temporary farm workers less than ideal candidates as renters.

We are dependent on the labor of farm workers to put food on our own tables yet there are many factors stacked against them. Farm workers deserve to be able to access safe shelter during times of disaster without the fear of deportation.

Act!

Reforming immigration policies is one way to ensure that those who are feeding us are being treated in caring and just ways. The Agricultural Workers Program Act ("Blue Card" Bill) helps address the current immigration crisis in agriculture by providing experienced farm workers with a path to temporary immigration status, followed by an opportunity to earn lawful permanent residency through continued work in agriculture.

Learn More!

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

About Us

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.

To learn more, visit nfwm.org

