

A SUMMER OF DEADLY HEAT (2008)

By Dick Meister

The summer heat is posing serious dangers for the farmworkers who've helped make California the nation's leading supplier of fruits and vegetables.

The state has rules designed to protect workers from the devastating temperatures in the vineyards and fields that can hover near or above 100 degrees throughout much of the summer. The rules require mainly that workers have easy access to water and regular shade breaks.

But the rules are inadequate and, in any case, are routinely violated by growers and the labor contractors who hire crews for them, says the United Farm Workers union.

UFW President Arturo Rodriguez is certain "the state does not have the capacity to protect farmworkers ... They are not being protected from the extreme heat they labor under to pick the food we have on our table."

Overall statistics on deaths and illness caused by the heat are difficult – if not impossible – to come by. But the UFW and others cite individual cases that make the danger faced by farmworkers alarmingly clear.

Consider the death this year of a 17-year-old undocumented Mexican immigrant, Maria Isabel Vasquez, which prompted UFW members and supporters to lead a four-day pilgrimage to the State Capitol in Sacramento to demand tougher and more tightly enforced heat regulations.

Maria, two months pregnant, collapsed in the arms of her 19-year-old husband-to-be, Florentino Bautista, following several hours of pruning grapes in 100-degree heat. They were working for a contractor who had been issued citations on three occasions for exposing workers to possible heat strokes and failing to train them to avoid heat stress – and who already owed the state more than \$2,000 in fines. Authorities are investigating Bautista's claim that Maria, whose body temperature reached 108, was denied shade and water.

Bautista said the pruning crew's foreman recommended instead that she rest in a hot van and be revived with rubbing alcohol before he could take her to a nearby medical clinic, almost two hours later. California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Mexican authorities said that, at any rate, Maria's death was preventable. It could perhaps have been prevented by such a simple thing as placing jugs of water throughout the vineyard, as foremen did in response to the death.

Ramiro Carillo, a 48-year-old with two teenage children, was one of four workers to die of heat stroke in a recent two-week period. He died on the way to a hospital. Among the other victims was Abdon Felix Garcia, 42, a father of three children who died after several hours of loading and transporting boxes of table grapes. His core body temperature reached 108 degrees just before he died, matching the temperature in the vineyard.

Last year's victims included 52-year-old Eladio Hernandez, who died of a heart attack while working in the sweltering heat of a Northern California orchard. His employer waited almost three hours before calling for medical assistance, and it didn't arrive until Hernandez' fellow workers called 911 on their own. The employer actually said he could not give employees suffering from the heat more or longer breaks than allowed the others because that "would be discrimination."

Many workers have come forward with similar accounts of employer indifference -- for instance, Jairo Luque, who works in carrot fields: "The water runs out and they do not bring any more. Sometimes they bring tap water, which is not clean. Sometimes the water is hot. People are desperate because there's no water. We are not camels than can be working without water."

Vineyard worker Alfredo Alvarenga says if you're fatigued and want to take a break then, before or after your regular break, forget it. "You just have to keep going. Workers are not allowed to take more breaks, because it's work time and the supervisors cannot find you resting."

Martin Zavalka, another vineyard worker, says "in the fields the temperature is 108-110 degrees. The company provides umbrellas for shade... very little umbrellas. Sometimes the umbrellas are broken and the company takes three or four days to replace them." Zeferina Castillo recalled a recent, typical Saturday: "It was really hot ... four people fainted."

Growers and labor contractors, says Arturo Rodriguez, have to realize that "the farmworker is not an agricultural implement. We're not a tool, we're human beings. People need to feel that the life of whoever it is who's working in the fields is important."