

# Thirteen farm workers killed in California van crash

Jerry White  
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Thirteen farm workers were killed Monday when their overloaded van crashed into a tractor-trailer that was making a U-turn in the early morning darkness on a remote road in the San Joaquin Valley in central California. The accident, near the town of Five Points, occurred around 5:10 a.m. as the workers were returning to their homes in Fresno shortly after finishing a 12-hour shift sorting tomatoes in the fields at Terra Linda Farms.

Only 2 of the 15 people in the van—which was carrying 10 men and 5 women—survived after the van hit two empty trailers being pulled by the truck, California Highway Patrol officers said. Two of the injured—a 21-year-old woman in critical condition and a 41-year-old male in serious condition—were flown by helicopter to University Medical Center in Fresno.

The truck driver, who was not injured, was turning his rig around after parking on the right shoulder of the two-lane road to sleep. “They couldn’t avoid hitting the tractor-trailer,” CHP officer Eric Erickson said, “their brakes locked up.”

In an attempt to identify the victims, CHP officers took instant photos of the dead and showed them to the dozens of farm workers who converged on the accident scene. One was totally overcome. “It’s my friend,” Jesus Manuel Arellano said in Spanish, breaking down in tears. He said he also lost his sister-in-law, a mother of three children. “She was such a hard worker,” Arellano said. “Now there’s three kids left without their mother.”

According to police the workers were in the back of a 1983 Dodge Ram minivan, sitting on three homemade wooden benches that were installed, without seat belts, along the sides of the vehicle. The van was smashed like an accordion on impact, according to police. The truck’s trailer sliced through the front portion of the

van, instantly killing the driver and front seat passenger. Others were hurtled toward the front of the van, crushing each other.

While it is generally illegal in the state to have anyone ride without proper seats and seat belts, certified farm vehicles are excluded from this law. This particular van was certified as recently as 1997, according to a sticker on the vehicle, said CHP Sgt. Bill Esme, who is leading the accident investigation. It was registered to an older worker, whose son was apparently killed in the crash.

Yolanda Cervantes, who organizes an annual driver safety awareness program in nearby Mendota, came to the scene. She said most farm workers have no alternative but to ride in crowded vans, which, although legal, remain very dangerous. With a median income from farm work of between \$2,500 and \$5,000, less than half of all farm workers can afford to own their own vehicle.

“I know people personally who have died in these accidents. Something has to change because every time you see these you don’t have one death, you have multiple deaths. I’ve seen too many,” Ms. Cervantes said.

Unsafe transportation for migrant workers is so commonplace in California’s agricultural heartland that overloaded vans are said to contribute to a disproportionate traffic death rate among Hispanics in the area.

David Lighthall, the director of the California Institute for Rural Studies in Davis, California, told the WSW, “In Fresno and Madera counties, between 1995-96, there were 29 hired farm workers killed in seven multifatality accidents involving *Raitero* vehicles,” i.e., those owned by a foreman or another worker who is generally paid two or three dollars a day

to transport farm workers.

“In California they pass legislation to regulate *Raitero* safety and other things like pesticide exposure and housing conditions,” Lighthall said. “But the state just doesn’t provide the resources for budgets or enforcement, and fines are few and far apart.” In 1997 one-fifth of 1 percent of all farm employers were inspected, he said. “Of the 248 employers inspected, more than half were out of compliance with health and safety laws.”

There are between 800,000 and 900,000 farm workers in California and 3 to 5 million nationally. Estimates are that anywhere between 1 out of every 10 to 20 are minors. It is legal for 12-year-old farm worker children to work alongside their parents, whereas other children must be at least 14 to work. The migrants, many of whom are Hispanic immigrants, travel north during the growing season, following the crops or traveling back and forth from home bases in Florida, Texas, California and Mexico.

According to the Center for Disease Control, life expectancy for the migrant worker is 49 years, compared to 73 years for the general US population. Nearly 50 percent of farm worker children laboring in the fields have been sprayed with pesticides, which have been linked to childhood brain tumors and leukemia.

Agribusinesses profit handsomely from the backbreaking work provided by the farm workers, who harvest more than \$28 billion of the fruit, vegetable, and horticultural specialty crops in the US. These same corporations exert great influence in state legislatures in California and elsewhere.

Last March a Texas state Senate panel endorsed a bill that would make it illegal to carry anyone younger than 18 in the back of a pickup. Before forwarding the bill to the Senate, the committee adopted an amendment that would exempt underage farm workers being transported from one field to another outside city limits.



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