

Michigan farm workers die from inhaling fumes in silo

Josué Olmos
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Seventeen-year-old Francisco Martínez and 18-year-old Victor Pérez died July 12 while working inside of a silo at a dairy farm in Thornapple Township, Michigan. While the Barry County sheriff initially thought the pair had fallen into the silo to their deaths, he later told the families that they had died due to the inhalation of fumes.

Pérez had recently graduated from nearby Thornapple Kellogg High School, and Martínez had just recently joined his family in Michigan after finishing school in Mexico.

The pair was power washing the 8-to-10-foot-wide silo that had only an 18-inch opening at the top. The silo was said to have contained a “molasses-like substance” thought to have been used as a supplement in cow feed.

Martínez and Pérez were provided with no protective equipment—neither gloves, safety glasses, nor respiratory masks—while performing the task. The sheriff speculated that the boys became unconscious inside of the silo due to gases released from the fermenting substance, and at least 10 to 15 minutes had elapsed before they were found.

The Sheriff has classified the deaths as an accident, but is still conducting an investigation, as is the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (Mi-OSHA).

Adelfo Pérez, the father of Martínez and also a worker at the Yankee Springs Dairy Farm, spoke with local news outlet WZZM concerning the circumstances of the event and the conditions on the farm in general. He indicated as well that the chemical inside the silo was used for cow feed, and added, “That chemical was on the farm for six months and it was no longer useful, and that’s why the boys were told to clean it.”

José Pérez, Victor Pérez’ father, said that when he

heard about the death of his son he ran out of the house to the farm so fast that he did not put shoes on. When he walked on the liquid inside of the silo he said that he felt burning on his feet. The young Pérez’s wallet reportedly had a pungent chemical smell.

Martínez’s mother told WZZM that she blamed the dairy farm’s owner, Paul Lettinga, for failing to provide the pair with proper protective gear. Adelfo Pérez also said that Lettinga had threatened him and other workers in the past that they would be fired if they refused to complete assigned jobs.

That farm workers labor in miserable conditions under intense pressure is no secret. Farm workers across the Midwest, in the South, in California and other areas face extreme heat conditions on a daily basis in the summer months, while farm owners defy regulations to provide adequate shade and water. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has also warned that farm workers working in enclosed areas, such as manure pits and silos, face death from the inhalation of toxic gases.

A 2006 study revealed that the danger of death faced by farm workers is multiplied for workers younger than 20 years of age. Study authors David L. Hard and John R. Myers reveal that from 1992 through 2002, “The rates were higher for young workers in agriculture production than for young workers in all industries by a factor of 3.6.” The worker fatality rate for young farm workers during the same period was 2.9 times higher than the fatality rates for all workers in all industries.

Workers in the agricultural sector, like those in the oil and mining industries, face deteriorating working conditions as already weak safety regulations have been rolled back over the past few decades.



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