

US farm fatalities: An unpublicized epidemic

Naomi Spencer
18 August 2014

Hundreds of agricultural workers, including many child laborers, die in farming accidents across the US each year. With an official workplace fatality rate of more than 21 per 100,000, farming is the most dangerous occupation in America. It is also among the lowest paid and least regulated.

Every day, at least 167 farm workers suffer a lost-work-time injury according to data compiled by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. One in every twenty of these daily accidents is so severe that permanent impairment results.

In 2012, the most recent year for which data is available, some 14,000 children were injured on American farms. On average over the past few decades, 113 youth have died each year from farming-related injuries.

These statistics, as staggering as they are, are likely a gross understatement of the actual conditions that prevail on US farms. While the official full-time agricultural workforce numbers about 1.8 million, including 955,000 youth, industrial farming operations draw heavily from an often undocumented immigrant workforce that numbers in the millions.

Tractor accidents are the most common source of deaths and severe injuries, most frequently from rollovers. Most could be prevented by roll cages and seat belts, yet only one-third of US tractors are equipped with these basic safety devices. Machinery “entanglements” and run-overs, animal-related injuries, and silo and grain bin accidents are other common causes of death.

Less tracked are deaths by respiratory disease and chemical exposure. According to the US Department of Agriculture, leukemia, Hodgkin’s disease, non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, cancers of the skin, stomach, brain, and other diseases have “excessive occurrences in farmers” that are suspected to be linked to exposure to pesticides, fertilizers, and other common chemicals.

Although the Obama administration last year pledged to improve agricultural workplace safety standards, the Labor Department continues to allow a “parental exemption” for farming whereby “minors of any age may be employed by their parents at any time in any occupation on a farm.” Other children aged 12 and older can work on any farm with their parents’ permission. These children are at a high risk of injury, illness, and are often put to work for 10 or more hours a day in peak harvest months. Child farm laborers are also at risk for missing out on school, and drop out of high school at four times the national rate.

Under the cover of helping small, struggling “family farms,” federal child labor exemptions allow for the 87 percent of farming operations classified as “family operated” to employ youth laborers and escape many other basic regulations under the Fair Labor Standards Act. The Environmental Protection Agency notes that “the term ‘family farm’ does not necessarily equate with ‘small farm’... Many of the country’s largest agricultural enterprises are family owned.”

A selection of local news items over the past month provides a picture of the hazards.

- July 18: James Heuer, 37, of Tulare, California was killed when he was run over by a spray rig at the College of the Sequoias farm where he worked.

- July 21: Pine River Township, Michigan resident William Courter, 46, was killed while he and other farm laborers were repairing a barn. Courter was run over by a bulldozer. “There was no operator seated on the machine at the time of the incident,” a police statement said.

- July 22: 9-year-old Gavin Martuccio died after being thrown from an ATV and striking another piece of farm equipment on his family’s farm in Kingwood Township, New Jersey.

- July 22: Barry Knapp, 76, of Westfield, Iowa died after being hit by a hay bale as he worked stacking

large bales.

- July 26: In Barneveld, Wisconsin, 71-year-old Kenneth Powell was killed after being struck and pinned under his tractor.

- July 29: A Plainview, Texas man was killed as he attempted to dislodge weeds from a shredder. Paul Raymond, 57, was found by his family in the morning after he did not come home the evening before. "Farmers work all hours of the day and night, and their family members understand that," the local sheriff told the *Lubbock Avalanche-Journal* .

- July 29: Napoleon, North Dakota saw its third fatal grain bin accident in less than six months when Marvin Grenz was buried in grain.

- July 29: Elias Hoover, 57, was moving bales of hay from a steep hill with a front-end loader when the machine tipped on top of him in Chapman Township, Pennsylvania.

- August 2: Four Epworth, Iowa boys, all 14 years old, were killed when a truck hit a John Deere utility vehicle they were driving. Sean Kenneally, Mitchell Kluesner, Nicholas Kramer and Bryce Wilwert were about to start their freshman year of high school. Fourteen-year-olds are permitted to drive farm vehicles for work purposes in the state.

- August 4: 81-year-old Bill White of Switz City, Indiana narrowly avoided being crushed to death in a grain bin. Farmhands and relatives drove plywood boards into the tons of corn surrounding him to keep him from sinking. It took 40 minutes to pull White out; he was airlifted to an Indianapolis hospital with injuries to his chest.

- August 7: An 8-year-old boy was injured in a farm equipment accident in Seneca Falls, New York. Police have not released the child's name, but said he is in critical condition after sustaining head injuries from a cow hoof trimming machine.

- August 7: Churchtown, New York farmer Kenneth Rice, 73, was injured when he became wedged under the cutter deck of a tractor-mower. He was airlifted to Albany Medical Center for crushing injuries.

- August 9: A 15-year-old Lancaster County, Pennsylvania boy drowned in a manure pit when the ski loader he was operating tipped over and trapped him underneath it.

- August 9: A Waterford, Wisconsin man died after his tractor flipped over on him. His name has not been

released as of this writing. The 53-year-old was operating the tractor at night.

- August 10: Kent Sorensen of Mayfield, Utah was crushed by a tractor as he baled hay.

- August 11: Glen Rock, Pennsylvania resident Dana Eugene Doll, 47, died after being run over by a tractor.

- August 13: In Dawson County, Georgia, 63-year-old Jerry Ledford was killed when his tractor overturned onto him as he mowed an embankment.

- August 14: Sixty-three-year-old Phillip Grady of Smyth County, Virginia was found dead in an ATV crash when he did not return home from spraying fields.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact