

Migrant Occupational Health and Safety

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July 2008

Among the many debates surrounding immigration and use of migrant workers in agriculture is the question of how many such workers are there? The truth is that no one knows. In a study done several years ago, New York Center for Agricultural Medicine and Health (NYCAMH) researchers calculated that slightly over 14,000 migrant workers would have been needed in NY to harvest the amount of produce recorded for the year 2000. This excluded those working in nursery and other horticulture. The same year, the NYS Department of Labor counted only 8,200 workers in the state – so no one really knows how many such people are working in NY.

We do know that the traditional image of “migrant” workers is getting outmoded. Now along the East Coast the majority of these workers are “shuttle migrants” who have established a home base, but may travel up to 75 miles to work on a given crop. About 20% are “follow the crop” migrants who may move from state-to-state. Here in New York we are seeing a steady increase in Latino dairy workers who don’t fit well into either of these categories.

What still applies to these workers is that they share the increased risk of occupational illness and serious injury experienced by everyone who works in agriculture. In many situations the actual work tasks done by migrant workers is somewhat different, so the pattern of these illnesses and injuries may be somewhat different. For example, muscle and joint problems related to repeated motions, particularly with heavy apple bags, are a major problem in New York orchards. Eye injuries and problems related to falls from ladders are other common orchard occurrences. People working in vegetables also suffer muscle and joint injuries related to rapidly repeated motions, heavy loads and prolonged awkward postures (bending, stooping, and twisting). Eye irritation from wind, sun, dust and chemicals is common. Skin problems related to plant irritants, agrichemicals and allergy are fairly common in some commodities. In dairy, most migrant workers perform animal care, milking and in-barn tasks. As a result they are at greatest risk for being stepped on, butted or pinned against a wall by a large animal.

The issue of pesticides always arises in discussions about occupational hazards for migrant farmworkers. The limited data available suggest relatively low rates of acute poisonings related to pesticides. However this occurs in a setting where many workers can not readily see a doctor and in which many doctors are not trained or experienced in recognizing acute pesticide problems. Probably of greater concern is the issue of low grade, but ongoing exposure to pesticides. This certainly can occur on the job, but studies have found a number of pesticide residues in many migrant housing sites as well. The most concerning aspect of these lower level exposures is the uncertainty about their long-term impact upon these workers and upon their families. For these reasons, avoidance of field exposures, careful handwashing in the fields, showering before contaminating the home environment and separate laundering of field clothing remain important practices.

While many Americans appear to have limited insight into the contributions of these immigrant workers, those in agriculture do appreciate how essential these people are to New York's overall agricultural productivity. Like any other worker, they deserve the chance to work productively without being made sick by their job. The researchers at NYCAMH have been privileged to work with both migrant farmworkers and their employers in a series of projects aimed at re-designing the work so that these workers remain just as productive, but with lowered risk of occupational illness and injury.

Farm safety services offered by NYCAMH include training sessions and on-farm safety surveys. Please contact Sharon Scofield at 800-343-7527 x 236 or by emailing sscofield@nycamh.com. All of our safety services are farm specific and available to you at no cost, voluntary and strictly confidential. Funding is provided in part by a grant from the NYS Department of Labor Hazard Abatement Board. NYCAMH, a program of Bassett Healthcare Network, is enhancing agricultural and rural health by preventing and treating occupational injury and illness.