

PALM BEACH POST

April 24, 2005

From the listserv of farmworker legal advocates

Workers fearful to report injuries

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IMMOKALEE - Farmworkers have more to worry about than anyone else when it comes to pesticides. Many Florida workers interviewed in recent weeks say they are affected by agrichemicals.

Maria Fernandez, 42, of Cancun, Mexico, sits outside a shoddy trailer she shares with other workers. "Everybody around here always has headaches, coughs, running noses," she said. "It has to do with that dust on the plants from the chemicals. You are always breathing it in."

Angel Marino, 34, of Oaxaca, Mexico, displays welts on his arms. "I use gloves and wear long sleeves, and I still get this," he says. "Pus comes out of these blisters when it's very bad."

Claudia Soirana, 28, talks about working in a field near Immokalee in March. "The tomatoes had some kind of plague and were dying, so they used a stronger spray," she said. "How do I know it was stronger? Because we could feel it all over our skin. Everybody in my trailer started getting bumps all over our skin. My sister got it, another man who lives here, too. No, we didn't say anything to the bosses. They wouldn't do anything anyway."

Failure to provide workers with protective clothing is the second most common violation inspectors find in Florida's fields and nurseries. In the last 10 years, there have been 1,147 such violations. Fines were issued in only 35 cases, according to data from the Florida Department of Agriculture and Community Services.

A 2003 study by the University of Florida - in Volusia, Lake, Seminole, Orange and Polk counties - revealed that 79 percent of fernery workers and 31 percent of nursery workers experienced skin rashes they said were caused by pesticides. The fern workers also reported allergies, headaches and swollen hands.

The recent births of Carlitos Candelario, who has no arms or legs, and two other children with defects - one who died - has made workers in the Immokalee area nervous.

Alejandra Vasquez, 32, says one of her co-workers is three months pregnant. "We tell her it isn't good for her to keep working because of the chemicals. That it might be dangerous," says Vasquez

Workers almost never report incidents of pesticide exposure because they are afraid of being fired. Despite the recent passage of state laws allowing farmworkers to ask for information on the pesticides being used around them, the workers rarely do so.

The Mexican government is worried enough about the problem that its representative in Florida, Consul General Jorge Lomonaco, has discussed it with Agriculture Commissioner Charles Bronson.

"The workers won't report these incidents because they are afraid they will lose their jobs or maybe even be deported," says Lomonaco. "A new system is needed."