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Farmworkers seek answers in apparent pesticide poisoning

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CALDWELL — Maria Aguirre, 22, was working in a field July 6 with her mother, brother and 26 others when she "started feeling like I needed air and everything was going in circles."

Other workers, including Aguirre's mother, had more severe symptoms — headaches, vomiting and diarrhea — after working for several hours in an onion field near Caldwell. More than 22 workers were hospitalized and two were admitted for critical care at Caldwell's West Valley Medical Center. They apparently were victims of poisoning from working in a field still wet from pesticide application, officials said.

The Idaho departments of labor and agriculture are investigating the incident, and on Friday night about 30 farmworkers and advocates from the Idaho Community Action Network met at Farmway Village Community Center to urge officials to take action and share information in the case.

Workers said many farm-labor contractors are not following the Farm Labor Contractor Licensing and Bonding law passed in 2002 by the Idaho Legislature. Workers are not given information about the terms of their employment and are not told about what their rights are, they said.

"If I knew what my rights were and if I had been told about the pesticide video that I had to watch before my employment, I would have recognized the pesticides," Aguirre said.

Not one of several workers interviewed by The Idaho Statesman said they had received training or information from their employer regarding pesticides.

Dunnia Aplicano, state monitor advocate for the Idaho Department of Commerce and Labor, told farmworkers the state could do a better job of getting information out



Joe Jaszewski / The Idaho Statesman

Maria Aguirre and her brother Miguel Ramirez, 14, were among 29 farmworkers who suffered pesticide poisoning July 6 while working in an onion field near Caldwell.

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Additional Information

to the public about workers' rights and other issues.

ICAN urged the labor and agriculture departments to develop a public information campaign on Spanish-language radio.

Advocates also asked the agriculture department to fully disclose findings once the investigation is complete, hold a meeting at Farmway Village to distribute those findings and levy the highest possible penalties if they find the farmer or applicator violated regulations.

Agriculture department representatives handed out a brochure in Spanish and English, detailing the investigation and enforcement process. They said the farmer or applicator could face civil fines of up to \$3,000 and could be referred for criminal prosecution.

ICAN asked the labor department to fully disclose the number of contractors registered to hire farmworkers and whether they're complying with insurance, surety bonds and other state-mandated requirements; vigorously enforce the laws by checking contractors; and monitor compliance by visiting farm fields routinely.

"Education is critical," said Wayne Hoffman, spokesman for the Idaho Department of Agriculture. "We're constantly providing training to applicators and farmers on the proper and safe handling of pesticides."

Hoffman said the department does quite a bit of outreach but is open to suggestions.

"You can't prevent every accident, but we do everything in our power to provide the information to keep farmworkers safe," he said.

Hoffman said he could not give the details of this incident because of the ongoing investigation, which is expected to take about 30 days.

Farmworkers said they are anxious to know exactly what pesticide they were exposed to and what the long-term effects may be. But state spokesmen said the investigation has not yet confirmed the pesticide used and urged workers to consult their doctors.

Workers complained that not much has been done on behalf of farmworkers.

"This is not the first time that this has happened to me," farmworker Leticia Silva said. "Last year, I was sprayed by an airplane with pesticides and to this date, I have not heard what actions your (agriculture) department has taken."

"Now, I can never go back to the fields because I am afraid the third time may be my last time."

Farmworkers shared their stories of the July 6 pesticide poisoning.

"It was around 11:30 a.m. when I started to experience headaches, nausea and pains in my stomach," said Antonia

Fund-raisers planned

Farmworkers and supporters have organized several events to benefit families and individuals who were contaminated.

Today

A car wash will be from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the Hartwell Corp., 1220 E. Cleveland Blvd., Caldwell. Donations will be accepted.

A yard sale will be from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at 2011 Blaine St., Caldwell.

July 22

A dance will be held from 8 p.m. to 1 a.m. at La Tropicana in Caldwell. Donations of \$5 or more are requested for admission.

Perez. "Soon, I got a strong urge to vomit and my body began to tremble. I did not know why this was happening to me."

The crew boss called sheriff's dispatchers, who contacted the Caldwell Fire Department. Sheriff's deputies and Caldwell fire emergency crews responded with decontamination trailers about 12:38 p.m. Workers were asked to remove their clothes and take showers in a tent. Several of the worst cases were treated near the fields with little to cover their nakedness, workers said.

"That was hard," Aguirre said. "It doesn't feel good seeing your mother showered in front of everybody."

The agriculture department has received about five to eight contamination complaints each year for about the past five years, Hoffman said. In fiscal 2004, he said, only two of five complaints were valid.

Aguirre and others said they're still struggling with symptoms. She said none of her family members have worked since the incident.

Many workers said doctors have told them the symptoms should go away as the pesticide leaves their systems, but they still have symptoms.

Workers and advocates said the ultimate responsibility should lie with the farmer. "He wants the work done, but he needs to look out for his people," said Yliana Gonzales Yado, Idaho Community Action Network board member.

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