

Statistics mirror hazards of farmwork



**NURSE
MURF**

By HELEN MURPHY

A TREE trimmer falls 69 feet from a tree to his death. An orchard tractor operator pulling bins of apples along a highway shoulder is struck by an automobile. A stationary

tractor tips over onto a farmer. An orchard tractor operator dies of blunt-force injuries caused by a tractor. A worker at a dairy is struck by a falling hay bale.

These were the causes of our five tragic deaths in agriculture reported by the Washington State Labor and Industry last year. This is down from the seven occurring in 2006, and far less than our worst years of 1998 and 2004 when agriculture work claimed 15 lives

per year. However, one death is far too many.

Since 1998, we have lost 94 in agriculture. Machinery and motor vehicles claimed over half: 34% and 23%, respectively. Another prominent cause has been falls from ladders, accounting for 15%.

How about nationally? The Bureau of Labor Statistics takes the workforce's pulse once a year by summarizing all work-related deaths and

surveying Occupational Safety and Health Administration employer logs from the previous year. Just out is the 2007 report on what happened in 2006 in terms of illnesses (morbidity), accidents and deaths (mortality).

Compared to other occupations, agriculture still ranks among the most dangerous. Looking at total deaths nationally, farmers and ranchers had the second-highest numbers. Only those that drive for a living have more fatalities: 940 in 2006 compared to the 291 in agriculture.

But when it comes to rates — meaning deaths per 100,000 workers — agriculture was ranked sixth among those occupations in the highest-fatality category. Looking at the whole workforce, almost four workers per 100,000 died in 2006 compared to 37 farmers and ranchers. So safety continues to be a critical issue in agriculture.

Ag equipment deaths

Nationally, the causes of deaths were similar to what was seen on a state level. Among managers, it was limited to transportation incidents. But for workers, the causes of deaths were more mixed. After transportation, which accounted for 44% of the deaths, agricultural equipment was the cause of 34% followed by assaults and violent acts (11%), and harmful substances or environments (5%). Falls, fires or explosives explained the remaining 3% of the deaths.

How often is our agriculture workforce injured compared to other workers? BLS data shows that crop producers fare better at a rate of 5.3 injuries per 100 workers than those in construction (5.8) and manufacturing (5.5). Those working with animals outrank everyone at almost eight injuries per 100 workers.

However, when it comes to illnesses, those working with animals have about half the illnesses (26 per 10,000 workers) than crop workers (55). The most common problems for both crop and animal producers were skin conditions, followed by smaller numbers of respiratory, poisonings and hearing disorders.

Comparing agriculture workforce illness rates to other occupations, they were overall more than miners and those in construction (12 and 15, respectively) and only slightly less than workers in manufacturing (58).

Keeping up on the statistics

How complete is this illness and injury information?

Only as good as the BLS survey methods of employer logs on ranches and farms with more than 11 employees.

Currently, BLS is adjusting its methods to capture missing cases. In the meantime, to follow these numbers, check these Web sites: www.lni.wa.gov/Safety/Research/About/default.asp and www.bls.gov/bls/safety.htm.

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