Farm Worker Dies from Heat Stroke



Joe* had been working in the North Carolina tobacco field for just over a week. The first few days on the farm were hot and humid, with welcome breaks of rain. But on this day, there was no rain. The thermometer had already climbed to 95F when Joe stopped for his soda and cracker break at 10 a.m. By the time the temperature reached between 100F and 108F at 3 p.m., Joe complained to the crew leader that he wasn't feeling well. The crew leader gave Joe a drink of water and drove him back to the workers? housing, where he left Joe to rest for a while. Forty-five minutes later, Joe was found on the steps of the house. He was unconscious. Emergency medical services were called and Joe was transported to the hospital, where his core body temperature was recorded at 108F. But Joe didn't respond to the medical personnel's attempts to cool him. His death was attributed to heat stroke.

A Little About Joe

Joe, 44, had traveled from Mexico to the US to join a crew of 12 H-2A workers employed by the farmer, who also employed 5 full-time workers and 3 part-time workers. (H-2A workers are temporary, nonimmigrant foreign workers who are hired under contract to perform farm work in the United States when American workers are not available.) Joe had no tobacco farming experience and when he died he?d been in the United States for 11 days.

The Investigation

Investigators learned that the farmer had distributed to all farm workers, including Joe, a safety and health booklet written in Spanish that included information on heat illness and heat stroke. Unfortunately, the employer did not make it a requirement that the workers read the booklet nor were the contents of the booklet discussed or reviewed.

Workers Take Heed

Heat stroke is preventable! To avoid falling victim to a similar death, anyone who works in the heat should:

- Stay hydrated. In a hot or humid environment, a body can lose up to a quart of water per hour through perspiration. This fluid needs to be replaced regularly. Sports drinks are fine because they replace electrolytes, but coffee, tea and soda with caffeine should be avoided because they dehydrate

the body. Alcohol also should be avoided because it affects the body’s ability to regulate temperature. Water is best.

- Take some time to acclimatize yourself to your work and the heat. The body needs to adjust to working in hotter temperatures so that it can improve the sweating mechanism. According to the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) a person requires approximately five to seven days to acclimatize to a hot environment.
- Learn how to prevent, recognize and treat heat illness. Joe was left alone to rest, rather than receiving prompt medical attention. Anyone showing signs of heat illness should be given water and allowed to cool off, rest and recover, but not left alone.

** The names aren’t real, but the incidents are. These accounts are based on actual fatality investigations.*