

Cantaloupe Picker Dies of Heat Stroke¹

California NURSE Project²

SUMMARY : CASE 191-002-01

A cantaloupe picker collapsed and died of heat stroke after four hours of work. The summer cantaloupe harvest is one of the hardest jobs in farming. Workers stoop to pick the cantaloupes and put them in bags they carry on their shoulders. When the bags are full and weigh about 50 pounds workers carry them to a truck. Crews are paid by the number of trucks they load in a day, and so workers do not stop for breaks.

The worker began picking at 6:00 a.m. At 9:00 a.m. he complained of a headache. He worked for another hour, and then his crew took a bus to another field. On the bus he began to pant, and felt anxious and sick to his stomach. The foreman stopped the bus and called an ambulance. The worker was taken to the hospital and treated, but died 36 hours later of heat stroke.

How could this death have been prevented?

- Have a person certified in first aid, including knowing the symptoms and treatment of heat stroke, on every field work team.
- Train workers to be aware of the dangers of working in the heat.
- Make crews take breaks and drink water, especially crews working at piece rate.

The NURSE (Nurses Using Rural Sentinel Events) project is conducted by the California Occupational Health Program of the California Department of Health Services, in conjunction with the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. The program's goal is to prevent occupational injuries associated with agriculture. Injuries are reported by hospitals, emergency medical services, clinics, medical examiners, and coroners. Selected cases are followed up by conducting interviews of injured workers, co-workers, employers, and others involved in the incident. An on-site safety investigation is also conducted. These investigations provide detailed information on the worker, the work environment, and the potential risk factors resulting in the injury. Each investigation concludes with specific recommendations

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2. NURSE Project, California Occupational Health Program, 2151 Berkeley Way, Annex 11, Berkeley, CA 94704.