

Lettuce Packer Collapses Due to Heat¹

California NURSE Project²

SUMMARY : CASE 292-127-01

Manual lettuce harvesting is often a two-person job. One person cuts the lettuce (the picker), while the other picks it up and packs it into a box (the packer). When full, these boxes weigh about 60 pounds. Wheel barrows are used to move these boxes.

On the day of this incident, it was unusually hot. The lettuce packer began packing lettuce early in the morning, and continued into the afternoon. However, he needed to take many breaks to drink water. During his lunch break, he only drank water and didn't eat anything. When back at work in the field, he collapsed. His supervisor called for an ambulance. The ambulance crew immediately started cooling him down by pouring fluids over him. He was taken to a hospital, where he was given treatment for heatstroke. He stayed in the hospital for close to a month. Although he recovered and went home, he has been advised not to return to this type of work in hot environments until he is examined again.

How could this injury have been prevented?

- Educate workers and field supervisors on early signs of heatstroke.
- Have workers immediately stop working if they show signs of heatstroke.
- Take immediate action to cool a worker if they become sick on a hot day.
- Make work tasks as easy as possible (especially on hot days).

- Provide shade for workers on hot sunny days.

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 designed to prevent injuries, for the use of employers, workers, and others concerned about health and safety in agriculture.

1. This document, CDHS(COHP)-FI-92-005-16, was extracted from a series of the Nurses Using Rural Sentinel Events (NURSE) project, 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. Publication date: May 1992.

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