Heat in the Field: Recognizing & Preventing Heat Stress in Outdoor Work Fatality File

Farm Worker Dies After Collapsing in Field During Late-Summer Heat Wave

On September 7, 2024, a 43-year-old farm worker, Oscar Pimentel, collapsed and died while harvesting crops at a farm in Oxnard, California during a late-summer heat wave. According to family members, Pimentel had complained earlier in the day of “suffocating from the heat” while working in the fields. His wife, who was working at a different farm nearby, reported that her employer had halted field work by 10:00 a.m. due to rising temperatures and had provided additional heat breaks — precautions that were reportedly not in place at Pimentel’s worksite.

Although the county medical examiner has not yet issued a final cause of death, Pimentel’s family and worker advocates believe he suffered a heat-related medical emergency, which kills more than 1,200 people annually according to the CDC. Cal/OSHA’s outdoor heat-illness standard requires employers to provide shade, water, and rest periods once temperatures exceed 80°F — conditions recorded in Oxnard on the day of the incident.

Cal/OSHA has opened an investigation into Del Sol Harvesting, Pimentel’s employer. The company maintains that Pimentel was not engaged in strenuous work and suggests an underlying medical condition may have contributed to his death. Pimentel had been employed with the company for eight years.

This case underscores the severe and often underestimated risk of heat stress in outdoor agricultural work, where even moderate temperatures can overwhelm workers performing continuous physical labor without adequate rest, shade, water, or monitoring.

Source: Abc7.com