

The Intersections of Undocumented Farm Workers and Climate change

A labor activist and a leader of the Chicano movement, Dolores Huerta, states, “Every single day we sit down to eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and at our table we have food that was planted, picked, or harvested by a farm worker. Why is it that the people who do the most sacred work in our nation are the most oppressed, the most exploited?” Farm workers are already being exploited but intersecting that with undocumented status and climate change pose even more of a challenge to farm workers. [Majority](#) of the farm workers are indigenous and undocumented migrating from Mexico to the western regions in the United States. In California, undocumented worker’s existing inhumane conditions will exacerbate due to climate change producing more intensive wildfires and extreme high temps. With climate change they experience detrimental health problems when working on the fields.

In the reading [The Uninhabitable Earth](#), “Since 1980, the planet has experienced a 50-fold increase in the number of places experiencing dangerous or extreme heat.” In the United States, “[Heat is the leading weather-related killer](#)” now imagine how damaging undocumented farm workers health will be working in already existing heat waves with now increasing temperatures in California. Undocumented farm workers “[face a 20 -to 35 fold risk of heat related deaths compared to other occupations.](#)” Therefore they are experiencing deadly conditions since they work in the fields with no breaks, inadequate water provided and no shade in the extreme heat. They are working 43-45 hours a week or even sometimes exceeding 60 hours. These heat related climate conditions can lead to them suffering short term effects such as dizziness, headaches, nausea, muscle cramps, weakness, slurred speech, loss of consciousness and seizures. Leaving these heat related conditions untreated can cause heat strokes, acute kidney injuries, and increasing existing asthma and heart diseases. For example, A Mexican farm worker, [Asuncion Valdivia](#) was working in 104 degrees Fahrenheit weather in California but passed away since the employer saw he woke back up again and cancelled the ambulance. Unfortunately, Asuncion Valdivia passed away on his way home due to not getting treated immediately with the assumption of employers thinking he didn’t need it. Asuncion Valdivia’s death and many others could’ve been prevented if there were more safety precautions and procedures in place. In addition, other factors that intensifies these heat related conditions are constant movements and farm workers wearing long sleeves to protect themselves from the pesticides. So, with the combination of increasing heat temperatures and metabolic workload, the body is generating heat due to physical exertion, it can lead to the worsening of heat stress. Furthermore, extreme high temperature can cause wildfires which also affects undocumented farm worker’s health.

In California most wildfires are ignited by lightning or human activities, but extreme high temperatures are also a cause and will produce more wildfires in the future due to climate change. If the wildfire wasn’t ignited due to the high temperatures the existing wildfire can still spread quickly, because of it. Also in California “[the average wildfire season three and a half months longer than it was a few decades back, but the number of annual large fires in the West has tripled — burning twice as many acres.](#)” Increasing wildfire means there will be more frequent smoke which releases fine particles, PM 2.5, in the air and reduces air quality. Short term effects of PM 2.5 are eye, nose and throat irritation. In the long term it affects their lung functions. When wildfire burns there are also chemical emissions mixed in the smoke, because ,

from the burning “[...pesticides stored in sheds to houses, garages and all they contain. When a fire burns a house, said Jaspers of the University of North Carolina, it also burns plastic, fiberglass, plywood and often tires on cars.](#)” Furthermore undocumented farm workers are working through these unknown toxins flowing in the air harming their health. For example during California’s Thomas fire they were working in the fields with smoke from the wildfires without protective masks against those harmful particles. Farm workers' throats were closing because of how difficult it was to breathe. They aren’t even able to take a rest or afford a day off in these unhealthy work conditions, because they won’t get paid. Two years after the Thomas fire California [created wildfire regulations for outdoor workers](#) where employers must supply N95 masks when the PM 2.5 is 151 or greater. Although these regulations were announced they weren’t completely enforced. According to [United Farm workers](#) they conducted a poll and 84% of farm workers were not given N95 masks from their employers. Farm workers would wear bandanas because of the pesticides but it doesn’t protect them from the wildfire smoke. Farm workers are expected to continue working unless the employers say something, but since the crops are more vital to employers, they disregard the health of undocumented farm workers. So not only is climate change affecting undocumented farm workers health, but employers aren’t concerned enough to provide safer working conditions with climate change in mind.

I put an emphasis on farm workers who are undocumented because they are experiencing these health problems due to climate change but aren’t getting the attention they need because of their undocumented status. Undocumented farm workers fear reporting their health conditions due to climate conditions, because they might get deported for complaining. Even when employers closed the operations because of unhealthy air undocumented workers won’t receive pay. Therefore, if they do get days off, they won’t receive their paycheck to be able to feed themselves and their family which can cause food insecurity. If undocumented farm workers want to get treated, they don’t have health insurance to be able to cover the costs of hospital visits. The addressment of health conditions are also a challenge, because there are mostly undocumented farm workers who speak [Indigenous languages](#) such as Mixteco and Zapoteco but employers aren’t providing translators for these languages. Aforementioned stories like Asuncion Valdivia could’ve been prevented if employers and farm workers are told about the connections of climate change and farm workers. So, in order to prevent deaths like Asuncion Valdivia in the future there needs to be solutions in place on how to prevent deaths and health injuries that are the cause of climate change conditions for undocumented farm workers.

A solution to this problem is the path to citizenship. By gaining citizenship, United States labor laws will protect them. Employers would have to be more attentive to their employees, because of their citizenship status or they could get sued. A Californian labor union, [United Farm Workers](#), is seeking [citizenship status](#) for undocumented farm workers. United Farm Workers (UFW) have a long history in providing assistance and seeking protection for undocumented farm workers. UFW provides [recent news](#) regarding how undocumented farm workers are affected by climate change conditions which can educate people on this topic. Also, they learn how severe the working conditions are. Currently the UFW is working for undocumented farm workers to vote. I think by letting them vote they can select the candidates that will address how they are being significantly affected by climate change and the path to citizenship. In order for bills to work they actually have to be enforced in the workplace and that's why I think citizenship is a must so they can have better protection. Gaining citizenship will provide them with better wages and safer conditions. Regarding healthier and safer conditions there would have to be translators employed to provide the Indigenous speaking farm workers important information

about how climate change is affecting them. Better precautions of climate change for undocumented farm workers are vital and labor unions like United Farm Workers and organizations are working on it.

Why should you care? First and foremost, undocumented farm workers are the ones who have to suffer through these extreme heat temperatures and toxins from the wildfire just to be able to provide the food you are eating in your plate. It should concern you, because they are the ones who are doing the extraneous work standing up all day while you sit comfortably eating your food. Secondly, we were taught in class how we breathe in the same air and that we are all connected. All our actions affect each other. Farm workers are providing the food and we are taking it, but what are we giving back? We need to think collectively by giving in something in return which is our attention and support of the injustices undocumented farm workers experience. We can't seek climate justice without seeking immigrant justice which includes their health and well-being working in the fields. I don't think it is impossible to seek both justices simultaneously. As Dolores Huerta says, "Sí, se puede!"