

NELSON & ASSOCIATES

3131 EAST 29TH STREET, SUITE E, BRYAN, TEXAS 77802

979/774-7755

E-MAIL: info@hazardcontrol.com

FAX: 979/774-0559

THE UNIQUE CHARACTER OF AGRICULTURE AND ITS WORKPLACE SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

Each year, production agriculture competes with mining and construction as the occupation with the most accident-caused fatalities per 100,000 workers, and the occupation with the highest disabling injury frequency rate. There is no question that agriculture is one of the most hazardous occupations in the nation.

The agricultural workplace is unique among the workplaces of America. Several factors combine to compound the effect of agricultural hazards. *Production agriculture* is distinguished from *general industry* in many apparent respects. Unlike general industry, whose structure and easier access to technical and managerial safety resources has allowed the reduction of worker injury rates over the past few decades through the exercise of management control over a relatively large, concentrated group of workers at one location, each farm or ranch is relatively small and geographically separated from one another, where workers often work alone or in small groups frequently isolated from supervision.

It should also be noted that general industry usually employs safety experts or assigns a full- or part-time coordinating responsibility to a supervisor, whereas farm managers must each attempt to set up their own safety programs without the training and established safety resources available to most industrial companies.

Agriculture also has a unique workforce. Although many large farms and ranches do exist, agriculture is still largely a family or small-business operation. On such farms and ranches, a significant portion of the full- and

part-time labor force in agriculture is supplied by the farm family itself, including farm wives, children, and the elderly. In no other workplace do wives, children, and the elderly get involved in the operation of complex mechanical equipment associated with such severe injury potential as in agricultural operations. Further, the hired workforce is often migratory, unskilled, and has a relatively low level of formal education. Frequently, this labor force may speak only Spanish (or another non-English language) and read neither English nor Spanish. Compared to general industry, this labor force is relatively inexperienced and untrained in the recognition and control of agricultural hazards.

Agriculture is also unique in terms of the physical characteristics of its "plant and equipment." A foundry in Georgia looks and operates the same as a foundry in California. A tire plant in Michigan looks and operates the same as a tire plant in Texas. However, each and every farm or ranch has special hazards related to topography and ground cover, including such things as hills, gullies, brush, trees, ponds, ditches, streams, holes and mounds created overnight by rain and fire ants, nearby roads and highways, and numerous other landscape features, as well as a wide variety of machinery and facilities of various ages.

Industrial workers, compared to agricultural workers, must become familiar with relatively few pieces of machinery and the skills to use them. No occupation has a higher exposure to the variety of hazardous machinery and their moving parts than does the typical agricultural worker.

A unique variety of stresses also face agricultural farm and ranch managers and workers. Medical experts have contended that the occupation associated with the highest level of general stress in the United States is agriculture. An industrial worker may have a limited amount of responsibility, task assignments, and machinery hazards with which to cope, whereas the typical agricultural worker may, over a short period of time, be forced to cope with a wide variety of job assignments involving a wide variety of machinery and equipment. Without discounting the stress that typically confronts the average industrial supervisor or manager, the stresses confronting the agricultural manager can be overwhelming. The typical farm manager must plan for and manage his business, operate and maintain a wide variety of hazardous equipment, and provide a significant part of the required labor while dealing with many additional stressful uncertainties. These uncertainties include weather conditions, disease and pest conditions, various economic uncertainties including ever-fluctuating commodity prices and interest rates. In general industry, similar stresses are not borne by one person but are shared among several individuals.

Those who manage the agricultural workplace, build agricultural facilities, manufacture agricultural machinery, or provide agricultural services, must recognize and

understand the special character of agricultural and rural life which accents the importance of agricultural safety-related issues. The unique character of agriculture dictates a special effort by those who build agricultural facilities, manufacture agricultural equipment, or provide agricultural services, to provide agricultural managers and workers, through the supply of their products and services, a workplace free of recognized hazards likely to cause serious injury.

Special note: “Production agriculture” that involves the growing of crops or the raising of animals must be distinguished from “agri-industry” that involves businesses that supply materials and equipment to those engaged in production agriculture (such as chemical and equipment suppliers) or businesses that process the products produced by production agriculture (such as grain elevators and meat processing plants). This is especially important in regard to applicable federal OSHA standards. That is, production agriculture is subject to and must comply with 29 CFR 1928 Agricultural regulations, and those businesses described as agri-business, agri-industry, or agri-processing plants are typically subject to and must comply with 29 CFR 1910 General Industry regulations.

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