

July 9, 2021

To:
Governor Jay Inslee
WA State Governor's Office
Alejandro Sanchez

(Note: We just saw the news.

<https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/WADLI/bulletins/2e781d8>

We send this letter in support of the strongest actions that can be taken to protect farmworkers' health and safety, including quick, effective and accountable enforcement.)

In fall 2016, a group of us in the Olympia/Thurston area formed out of our concern for immigrant rights. The Strengthening Sanctuary Alliance (SSA) has been involved in legislative/policy advocacy, protections for children and their families in the school system, examination of police/ICE activities, and direct support for immigrant families.

Over the past year, we have been increasingly attentive to conditions facing the agricultural labor community. We have been working to support agricultural workers – some of the very most essential workers – in their struggle to deal with the threat of covid and its impact on them and their families.

As immigrant and human rights advocates in SSA, we are now writing to urge you to issue emergency regulations in support of farmworkers dealing with dangerous heat and related aspects of climate change.

Overlaying the ongoing risk of covid is the planetary threat of climate change, with its uneven impacts. Workers in the fields and packing sheds are the “first and worst hit” in the dire, life-threatening conditions of heat, diminished air quality, storm systems, and fire. Here in WA, the Governor's Office has shown itself to be a national leader on climate change. Connected to that much needed effort is the growing movement in the state and around the world – Climate Justice. Advocates are dedicated to making sure that frontline communities and workers are of the highest priority: the public and the state leadership must understand the unequal impacts; essential workers and high-impact communities must be recognized as central participants in the problem-solving that is so vital right now.

We are writing as part of the broader social justice community to voice our support for the urgently needed strengthening of protections for agricultural workers and their communities. We join with the efforts that are being made by the United Farm Workers, Service Employees International Union, Northwest Immigrant Rights Project, Columbia Legal Services, WA State Labor Council and WA Immigrant Solidarity Network to protect and empower workers in the agricultural sector in the face of the climate crisis.

The scientifically grounded information on the health threats of heat exposure is broadly available. One valuable resource is a talk given recently by Dr. June Spector from the UW Department of Occupational/Environmental Health Sciences, entitled “Heat-related Illness and Injuries, Climate & Practical Solutions for Agriculture”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i4eubRoLHsA>. She provides the basics on heat stress and exhaustion, and identifies how heat is especially hazardous for those with pre-existing conditions (kidney disease, diabetes, etc.); how heat exposure also heightens the risks of chemical exposure; and how heat combined with diminished air quality through wildfire smoke exposure is especially hazardous. In view of the work of Dr. Spector and others, WA State needs to persist in examining the interconnected hazards of heat, smoke, air contamination and fire – especially as they impact high-risk workers. In rule-making on wildfire smoke, as part of the scourge of climate change, Labor & Industries must hold the line and put workers at the center.

Following the lead provided by UFW in their urgent recommendations, we see these as the key issues:

** The current system, based on existing regulations, is not functioning in support of workers; too many agricultural operations don't comply and too little enforcement is activated.*

** There needs to be preventative steps taken to protect workers from heat; workers need to be prepared and informed before they go into the fields.*

** Information about climate conditions (temperature, humidity, air quality) must be provided on a regular basis, as conditions change.*

** Shade and rest breaks need to be provided proactively and regularly – not waiting until workers are at the worst stages of heat exhaustion.*

** Drinking water must be constantly available – water that is cool and uncontaminated. (We have learned of workplaces where no water is offered during work shifts.)*

** Protection of the health of children in the fields must be a central element in the plan.*

** Heat protection in farmworker housing is essential (if that housing is provided by employers).*

** Health care for workers and their families must be ensured.*

** Comprehensive paid sick leave must be available when needed.*

** Workers and their representatives must be involved in all phases of developing and evaluating protective rules.*

** Required protections must be enforced and evaluated; there must be penalties for employers who don't abide by the rules of protecting workers against heat.*

** There should be public transparency about the process.*

** Workers should not be retaliated against for identifying hazards; whistleblowers must be protected.*

** It is important that the Agricultural Compliance Unit become operational; we ask that the process be expedited this growing season.*

** Health & Safety Committees should be empowered, with workers supported to effectively participate.*

Agricultural workers are putting themselves at risk as they work to put food on our tables. Media coverage is alerting us to the financial losses facing farm owners and agricultural managers. We are learning about the dire prospect of serious crop loss and ecological damage to farm lands. Intermittently we learn about the hazards to workers...what it's like for exhausted workers to drag themselves back into the fields. Workers' lives must be at the center as we go forward in taking on climate change and ensuring that climate justice ethics guide us. As the World Health Organization maintains, workplace health is a human right.

We urge WA – the Governor's Office, Labor and Industries, Department of Health – to quickly move forward with the sense of this being a clear and present danger, a “life or death” moment, on behalf of – and with – those working in agriculture. It's important that the strengthening of a “heat rule” and related climate justice measures do not languish ... that they don't slowly meander through a dysfunctional and imbalanced rule-making quagmire. We all recognize that the future is here now...and for farmworkers every moment counts.

With appreciation for your attention to this urgent matter.

Sincerely,

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CC:

Casa Latina

Centro Latino

CIELO

Columbia Legal Services

Comite

Community-to-Community

El Centro de la Raza

Faith Action Network, Paul Benz

Familias Unidas por la Justicia

Governor's Interagency Council on Health Disparities

Hispanic Round Table

Latino Civic Alliance

Latino Caucus, Democratic Party, Vanessa Malapote

Latino Leadership Network

NW Immigrant Rights Project

Pandion Strategy, Eric Nicholson

Representative Javier Valdez, House Members of Color Caucus

Senator Bob Hasegawa, Senate Members of Color Caucus

Service Employees International Union

The News Tribune, James Drew

The Olympian, Dusty Demarest

The Tri-City Herald, Cameron Probert

Trabajadores Unidos por la Justicia

United Farm Workers

WA Department of Health

WA Department of Labor & Industries

WA Division of Occupational Safety & Health

WA Immigrant Solidarity Network

WA State Commission on Hispanic Affairs

WA State Labor Council

WA State Public Health Association

Yakima Health District