

Some of the farmworkers who died and suffered tragedies on-the-job in North Carolina in recent years

*Many people are by now familiar with the tragic stories of **Raymundo Hernandez** (who had, in July 1995, exhibited signs of heat stroke or pesticide poisoning before disappearing from the tobacco fields where he had worked; several months later, his skull was found under a pecan tree), **Carmelo Fuentes** (who, in August 1998 was picking tomatoes when he suffered from heat stroke which caused severe brain damage so that even years later he is still "brain dead"), and **Urbano Ramirez** (who, in July 2001 exhibited signs of heat stroke or pesticide poisoning while working in the fields, was not treated, and his remains were found weeks later). These tragedies continue each year in the fields of North Carolina. Here are a few more recent examples.*

Juan Jose Soriano died of heat stroke while harvesting tobacco in Wayne County on August 1, 2006. The NC Department of Labor (NCDOL) investigation found that "the employer did not furnish to each of his employees conditions of employment and a place of employment free from recognized hazards that were causing or likely to cause death or serious physical harm to employees, in that employees were exposed to heat-related hazards without adequate provisions to protect them." The investigation also found that "12 migrant farmworkers were exposed to heat indices of 105-110 degrees without the opportunity to adequately hydrate or cool down" and that subsequently one worker died of hyperthermia. The grower has contested the findings and the proposed penalty of \$2100. The Workers' Compensation claim is currently denied by the grower's insurance carrier. At the time of death Juan Jose Soriano had 5 children, 3 under the age of 18.

Name unknown: An African American farmworker died in Harnett County of heat stroke on August 4, 2006.

Rito Meza Castillo, age 59, worked in Harnett County and died of heat stroke on July 18, 2005, just two weeks after arriving in North Carolina. At the time of death Rito Meza-Castillo had 8 children all over the age of 18. His widow lives with some of her children and is being supported by her children. For close to a year after Rito's death, Rito's widow received checks of around \$50 every week from the insurance company, which argued that this was two-thirds of Rito's weekly salary. The case was settled for \$75,000 awaiting approval from the North Carolina Industrial Commission.

Pablo Ordaz, age 39, was working in Person County when he died of heat stroke on/around July 22, 2005. His body was found two days after he disappeared. According to Pablo's five co-workers, he died due to the employer's negligence and failure to provide medical attention to Pablo. An investigation by the NC Department of Labor found that the grower: did not provide adequate drinking water to employees, and specifically that he discouraged and reprimanded workers for stopping and drinking water. One former co-worker has reported that he was reprimanded for drinking water shortly before Pablo's death. At the time of death, Pablo Ordaz had 2 children, both under the age of 18 and his wife was pregnant, the baby was born in October of 2005 and then died in December 2005. His widow is currently working and providing for the youngest of the surviving children. The older son is now over the age of 18 and not living at home.

Name unknown: A Caucasian farmworker died of heat stroke on a Robeson County melon farm on July 27, 2005.

Mario Meneses Jael died towards the end of the season in 2005 in Johnston County. Mario Meneses Jael left his wife, one daughter in "secundaria," or middle school, and one son in "primaria," or elementary school. Their extended family has been helping them survive, since Mario's death, in N.C. The widow works when she can find work, but they are struggling. Mario's worker's compensation claim is still pending. His cousin, Jose Ventura, comments: "it's difficult, when someone goes to Carolina and comes home in a box."

Carlitos Candelario Herrera, Jesus Navarrete and Violeta Rueda Meza: In late 2004 and early 2005, three babies with severe birth defects were born to women employed by tomato producer AgMart. The women had worked both in North Carolina and in Florida and were illegally sprayed with pesticides by AgMart operators. Carlitos was born on December 17, 2004 without any arms or legs. Jesus was born on February 4, 2005 with an underdeveloped jaw and tongue that falls back into the throat. Violeta was born on February 6, 2005 with a missing ear and no visible sex organs. She died three days after birth.