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Cal/OSHA continues enforcement of heat illness prevention requirements

San Francisco – The Department of Industrial Relations’ (DIR) Division of Occupational Safety and Health (Cal/OSHA) continues to focus on heat illness prevention as temperatures again rise to triple digits. Last week’s enforcement actions uncovered violations of the heat standard across the state, and resulted in the shutdown of an agricultural employer’s operations for failing to protect workers in high heat. The grower failed to provide shade and other measures for his workers in temperatures that registered 105 degrees before noon.

“The safety and health of California’s outdoor workers is vital and our inspectors are out making sure that safety regulations are followed,” said DIR Acting Director Christine Baker. “Enforcement, while key, is only one tool we use to ensure compliance. We also partner with industry, community, and labor groups to educate employers and workers on steps needed to prevent heat-related illnesses and deaths.”

Cal/OSHA inspectors issued an Order to Prohibit Use (OPU) to Canoga Park-based owner Ho Ik Chang, dba Ty Farms working in Coachella, which resulted in the closure of their operation. A crew of four workers was observed in a chile pepper field working without access to shade. Inspectors learned that the crew had started their shift at 6 AM in heat that registered at 98 degrees at 8:30 am and spiked to 105 degrees before noon.

“This is precisely why we have inspections taking place across the state, to ensure that all employers are protecting their workers with good heat illness prevention programs. Adequate water, shade, rest breaks, training, and emergency procedures and training can mean the difference between life and death,” said Cal/OSHA Chief Ellen Widess. “California workers in agriculture, construction, landscaping, and other outdoor jobs are at risk of heat-related illness or death, but this risk is entirely preventable. Issuing an OPU is the strongest tool that we have in cases of imminent hazard such as this one in Coachella, and we will continue to use OPU’s when we find such high risk to workers’ health and safety.”

Not only did the crew lack training on how to prevent stroke and other life-threatening symptoms caused by heat; they had no means of communicating with their supervisor in case of an emergency, or have any emergency or safety plan in place. Workers did not know who they worked for, and no supervisor was nearby monitoring the workers, despite the high heat. When inspectors tracked the owner down about a mile away, they found another crew of six men working in an okra field with shade that was located too far away to provide relief.

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The operational shutdown will remain in place until the grower can demonstrate that the mandated safeguards are in place. Ty Farms' workers compensation insurer, the State Compensation Insurance Fund, has contacted Cal OSHA to indicate that they are working with the employer to correct the life-threatening hazards.

Cal/OSHA's efforts this summer are designed strategically to target employers who are not complying with the heat illness prevention standard. Enforcement efforts include state-wide traveling heat sweeps, local district actions when temperatures soar putting workers at greatest risk, as well as multi-agency enforcement through the Economic and Employment Enforcement Coalition.

California's heat illness prevention standard, the first in the nation, was strengthened last year to include a high heat provision that must be implemented by five industries when temperatures reach 95 degrees. These procedures include observing employees, closely supervising new employees, and reminding all employees throughout the shift to drink water. The specified industries include agriculture, construction, landscaping, oil and gas extraction and transportation or delivery of agricultural products, construction material or other heavy materials.

*For more information on heat illness prevention and training material visit the Cal/OSHA website at www.dir.ca.gov/heatIllness or the *Water. Rest. Shade.* campaign site at www.99calor.org. Cal/OSHA Consultation also provides free assistance to employers on their heat illness prevention and other safety and health programs. Contact Cal/OSHA Consultation at 800-963-9424.*

Employees with work-related questions or complaints, including heat illness, can call the California Workers' Information Hotline at (866) 924-9757 or 1-877-99-CALOR.

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