‘What choice do we have?’ US farm workers battle deadly heatwave

Martha Fuentes woke up at 3:30am last Thursday to prepare for her daily commute to her job in the grape fields of Kern County, California, one of the top vegetable-producing regions in the United States. She donned a wide-brimmed hat and a colourful bandana decorated with butterflies to protect herself from the heat that will make her work highly strenuous, even with the rest breaks and cool water provided by her employer.

When she started packaging fruit at 5:30am, the air was already a balmy 26.7C (80F). By 10am, it had risen to more than 32C, and perspiration poured down Fuentes's face.

"This year it's going to be more hot," she told Al Jazeera as she worked.

By the time Fuentes left the fields at 2pm, the temperatures had risen above 40C, leading the National Weather Service to issue an excessive heat warning for the area.

"High temperatures 106 to 114 degrees [41C to 46C] each afternoon," it read. "Extreme heat will significantly increase the potential for heat-related illnesses, particularly for those working or participating in outdoor activities."

But as North America reels under record-setting temperatures spurred by climate change, Fuentes and many like her feel that they have little choice but to continue to head out to the fields.

Squeezed between low pay and smothering heat, the largely poor and undocumented workers who harvest the bounty of California's fields face impossible choices between wages they cannot miss and temperatures their bodies cannot bear.

"The heat is too much," Fuentes said. "But what choice do we have? We can't afford to stop."

Piecemeal protections

Many farm workers are labouring under soaring temperatures with few protections in place to safeguard their health, advocates say, even as heatwaves that have resulted in hundreds of deaths engulf the western US and Canada.

States that have been hit by the heatwaves such as California, Oregon and Washington all have varying state laws on the books to protect farm workers.

For example, California, where Fuentes works, mandates the provision of 10-minute shaded rest breaks every two hours when temperatures are over 35C, as well as access to cool water, but enforcement of these laws in the state's large agricultural sector is imperfect, and there are no temperatures above which work must be stopped.

The latest bout of extreme weather has prompted renewed efforts by activists and farm workers to strengthen and expand protections at the federal level rather than the current piecemeal system.

"There are no federal standards that require employers to provide farm workers with water, shade, rest, and bathroom access when they're working in extreme heat," said Elizabeth Strater, director of organising at the United Farm Workers (UFW) union. "This gives employers free rein to push the bodies of their workers beyond what they can endure."

On June 26, a 38-year-old migrant farm worker named Sebastian Francisco Perez from Guatemala died at a nursery and farm in St Paul, Oregon after working for hours in temperatures that reached over 37.8C.

On July 7, Oregon Governor Kate Brown directed the Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to implement emergency standards that would expand obligations for employers to provide farm workers with shade, cool water and time to rest. Oregon OSHA is still in the process of establishing permanent standards for outdoor workers dealing with extreme heat.

Perez's death is sadly not an aberration: a study by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that farm workers die from heatstroke at a rate 20 times greater than for all non-military workers in the US.

A long list of names

Perez's name can now be inscribed alongside others like Asuncion Valdivia, 53, and Maria Isabel Vasquez Jimenez, 17, farm workers who died from heat exposure in California and are now used as symbols in the fight to enact new protections.

Valdivia died in 2004 after picking grapes for 10 hours in temperatures that rose as high as 40.5C. Vasquez died in 2008 after allegedly being denied access to water and shade during a nine-hour shift tying grapevines in which temperatures soared above 35C. At the hospital, her fiance said he learned that she was two months pregnant for the first time.

Various pieces of legislation now bear Valdivia and Vasquez's names.

In 2005, California passed landmark heat standards that were implemented after a string of farm worker deaths from heat exposure prompted demands for action. The standards were later renamed in honour of Vasquez, and have been subsequently strengthened on several occasions since 2005.

But not all states have those provisions in place, which is why in March of this year, Democrats in the US Congress introduced the Asuncion Valdivia Heat Illness and Fatality Prevention Act to enact federal heat standards mandating the provision of shade, water, and rest for farm workers.

A vulnerable workforce

But more action is needed, workers and advocates say. Despite being viewed as "essential workers" during the COVID-19 pandemic, many workers say the conditions they labour under do not match the honorific.

"Some companies treat workers well, but others care about the fruit more than they care about those of us who pick it," said Carolina, a 44-year-old farm worker outside of Delano, California, who asked that her last name not be used because she is concerned about retaliation from her employer.

Five months pregnant, Carolina faces a choice between staying home and missing out on wages, or going out to pick grapes as temperatures climb past 40.5C.

"The heat is too much. Sometimes my head feels light, sometimes I vomit. Workers have fainted in the fields," Carolina told Al Jazeera.

By nature, farm labour often involves hours of strenuous work while exposed to the elements. But that does not singlehandedly account for the disproportionate risks that farm workers face when temperatures rise, researchers say.

Yuridia Meza is one of the workers on the grape farm near Arvin, California [Photo: Brian Osgood/Al Jazeera]

Marc Schenker, director of the Western Center for Agricultural Health and Safety at the University of California, Davis, told Al Jazeera that factors such as workers' immigration status and low wages contribute as well.

"California has better laws on the books than most," said Schenker. "But the reality of being poor and undocumented is that you're less likely to speak up when those rules are being violated."

Even when heat standards are observed by farm employers, the demands of productivity can still push workers to the edge of what their bodies can endure, advocates say.

This is especially true of piece labour, a style of agricultural work where workers are paid per pound or per box rather than per hour. With lower productivity translating into lower wages, workers can feel pressured to skip things like water breaks so they can avoid using the restroom.

This pressure mounts when piece work combines with the shorter schedules that some farms implement when temperatures rise.

"You might have a situation where a worker only works six hours instead of eight, but during that time, they're putting extra strain on their body because they're trying to make up for the lost hours," Schenker explained. "A lot of the problems come down to wages that don't allow workers to get by."

Rising temperatures

North America experienced its warmest month on record in June, with an average temperature 1.2C above the 1991-2020 average, according to the Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S), the European Union's climate monitoring service.

"These heatwaves are not happening in a vacuum," C3S scientist Julien Nicolas said when the data was released. "They are happening in a global climate environment that is warming and which makes them more likely to occur."

As climate scientists warn that extreme heat will become more routine and more intense in coming years, a conversation about what must be done to protect workers is gaining traction.

"Climate resiliency got put on the radar for me when there were workers breathing in the smoky air during the wildfires without even being given masks," said Genevieve Flores-Haro, an associate director with the Mixteco Indigena Community Organizing Project (MICOP), an organisation focused on the rights of Indigenous farm workers on California's Central Coast. "These are communities on the front lines of the climate crisis, but they're often left out of policy creation," Flores-Haro told Al Jazeera. According to statistics provided by California's Division of Occupational Safety and Health (Cal/OSHA), the agency received between four and six heat-related complaints from agricultural workers in June 2020. This year, that number was between 22 and 27, although Cal/OSHA stressed that a variety of factors contribute to heat-related complaints and that 2020 saw fewer than average. Back in the grape fields outside of Arvin, Fuentes drank cool water out of a cone-shaped paper cup provided by her employer. She has been working as a farm worker in California for 31 years, and has felt every rise in temperature so far. Asked if the shorter hours implemented to account for the heat meant less money, she sighed. "Yes, less money. But what can we do? We can do nothing," Fuentes said. "There are workers still in the fields in their 70s. Their situation is the same as mine. They can't afford to stop."

Al Jazeera

Canada may allow fully vaccinated travelers by early September: Trudeau

Canada may permit fully vaccinated travelers into the country by early September, the country's prime minister said on Thursday, if the current trend in vaccination rate and public health conditions continue.

Justin Trudeau made the remarks in a call with Canadian provincial leaders, according to a readout of the call released by his office.

Trudeau also said there were ongoing discussions with the US to begin allowing fully vaccinated US citizens and permanent residents into Canada for non-essential travel by mid-August.

"The Prime Minister noted that, if our current positive path of vaccination rate and public health conditions continue, Canada would be in a position to welcome fully vaccinated travelers from all countries by early September," according to a statement.

Some 78 percent of people aged 12 years or older in Canada have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, health officials said recently. About 44 percent of people 12 years or older are fully vaccinated. Earlier on Thursday, Canada said it will allow large cruise ships to visit once again starting in November as the COVID-19 pandemic fades, but they must fully comply with public health requirements.

Explainer: The difference between COVID-19 mRNA and Adenovirus-vector vaccines

When COVID-19 invades our bodies, the virus tries to overcome the immune system. It attacks and multiplies in huge numbers readying itself for the inevitable fightback.

As the pandemic has shown, for many, their immune responses failed to combat coronavirus. The infection killed them.

Many others fell ill, some seriously, and some slightly, showing few symptoms at all while acting as carriers for the virus's spread.

It is ultimately the immune system that is the first and last line of defense against infectious disease. It uses a variety of tools to fight off infections, with red blood cells carrying vital oxygen to tissues and organs, and white blood cells acting as the key shield against infecting viruses, bacteria, fungus and other microorganisms.

Helping the body's immune system, we have multiple medicines at hand.

In the fight against viruses vaccines have benefited Mankind for generations. Polio, Rubella along with many others are blocked by the body's immune system when boosted by that vaccine.

How do vaccines work?

According to the global vaccine alliance GAVI, all vaccines work by exposing the body to molecules from the target pathogen to trigger an immune response.

When vaccines are introduced into the body, they offer protection by providing our bodies with a supply of memory to help it remember how to fight off the same virus if infected again in the future.

It typically takes two to three weeks after receiving a vaccine for the body to begin to produce its defense mechanism to ensure an effective immune response to defend itself in the event of that future infection.

Director General of the Ghana Health Service Dr. Patrick Kumaa-Aboagye receives the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) vaccine during the vaccination campaign at the Ridge Hospital in Accra, Ghana March 2, 2021. (File Photo: Reuters)

Peoples' knowledge of vaccines has increased considerably throughout the many months of the pandemic. This is unlikely to change because everyone wants to keep pace with the best ways to protect themselves from COVID-19. New technologies and medicines are likely in the world's long, continuous fight against COVID-19.

More specifically, different vaccine types will continue to be offered to the public, all of which will defend the body against the virus in different ways.

The best-known vaccines being used fall under two classes: messenger RNA (mRNA), and Adenovirus-vector vaccines. They are the basis for an array of big pharma brand named products.

Women's groups call for UN peacekeeping force in Afghanistan

From P3

generation of women taught to expect freedom? It will be one of the greatest crimes against humanity in history. Help us save them. Please. Help us save who we can."

Among the signatories of the letter were Yacoobi; feminist activist and writer Gloria Steinem; former U.N. deputy secretary-general Mark Malloch Brown who now heads the Open Society Institute; Filmmaker and philanthropist Abigail Disney; former UNICEF executive director Carol Bellamy; Betty Reardon, the International Institute on Peace Education's founding director emeritus; The Rev. Dr. Chloe Breyer, executive director of The Interfaith Center of New York; Masuda Sultan, co-founder of Women for Afghan Women; and Nasir Ahmad Kayhan, UNESCO program manager in Afghanistan.

In April the Taliban promised that women "can serve their society in the education, business, health and social fields while maintaining correct Islamic hijab." It promised girls would have the right to choose their own husbands, but offered few other details and didn't guarantee women could participate in politics or have freedom to move unaccompanied by a male relative.

Deborah Lyons, the U.N. special envoy for Afghanistan, told the Security Council on June 22 that "preserving the rights of women remains a paramount concern and must not be used as a bargaining chip at the negotiating table."

In a follow-up letter on July 12 to U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, a wider international group expressed deep concern "for the lives and well-being of the people of Afghanistan, especially women and girls now under great threat" and called for a U.N. peacekeeping mission to deploy to Afghanistan "as soon as practically possible."

The signatories said they are convinced the 2000 Security Council resolution obliges U.N. member states "to protect women in such circumstances."

The United Nations has a political mission in Afghanistan. A U.N. peacekeeping mission would have to be approved by the Security Council, where the five permanent members -- the U.S., Russia, China, Britain and France -- have veto power.

The letter to the U.S. ambassador said similar messages were being sent to other U.N. ambassadors from citizens in their countries asking for a peacekeeping operation. It asked Thomas-Greenfield to "take action toward the initiation of a peacekeeping operation in Afghanistan." A U.S. mission spokesperson did not respond to a request for comment on the call for a U.N. peacekeeping force, instead stressing Thursday that the Biden administration will continue to support Afghan forces and U.S. "diplomatic, humanitarian and economic engagement in the region." "We are putting our full weight behind diplomatic efforts to reach a peace agreement between the Taliban and the Afghan government," said the spokesperson, who could not be named, adding the U.S. remains the largest aid donor to Afghanistan and continues to support the U.N. political mission known as UNAMA.