

FACE Investigation # 90CO018

SUBJECT: Farm Worker Dies from Burns received while Fighting Range Fire

SUMMARY:

A 74-year-old male farm worker died at a local hospital from burns that he incurred while fighting a range fire. The victim was using a tractor equipped with a blade to create a fire break. As he neared the edge of the field he turned the tractor into the wind to come back across the field. As he executed the turn, the wind-driven range fire overtook the tractor. The victim jumped from the vehicle into the burning grass. The victim's clothing caught fire and he suffered 2nd and 3rd degree over 40% of his body. The CDH investigator concluded that, in order to prevent future similar occurrences, employers should:

\* develop, implement, and enforce a comprehensive safety program that includes worker training in recognizing and avoiding hazards including those associated with fire fighting.

INTRODUCTION:

On March 13, 1990, a 74-year-old farm worker suffered severe burns to over 40% of his body. The victim was assisting several personnel in fighting a grass fire in windy conditions.

A routine screening of state death certificates for work-related fatalities by the Colorado Department of Health (CDH) prompted an investigation of this fatal injury. A meeting was held with family members of the farm owner, and reports were obtained from the local volunteer fire department, the county sheriff, and the hospital where the victim was treated.

INVESTIGATION:

This family-owned wheat farm employs 4 workers and has been in operation for over sixty years. The business did not have a written safety policy and training was not conducted for the employees.

On the day of the incident the victim was using a grading blade mounted on a tractor to create a fire break downwind of the fire.

As the victim neared the edge of the field, he turned into the wind in order to reverse his direction of travel and make another cut in the field. While the victim was making the turn, the wind-driven fire overtook the tractor. The victim panicked and jumped from the tractor onto the burning grass. His clothing caught fire and he received burns to the face, arms, back and lower extremities. The local volunteer emergency medical service arrived at the scene 11 minutes after being contacted and the victim was transported to the closest medical facility, located approximately 25 miles from the scene, arriving 64 minutes after the time of injury. The victim was hospitalized for 2 weeks when his condition worsened and he expired.

CAUSE OF DEATH:

Candida sepsis as a consequence to 3rd degree burns was listed as the cause of death.

RECOMMENDATIONS/DISCUSSION:

Recommendation #1: Employers should develop and implement comprehensive written safety programs. As part of this safety program, the employer should conduct regular training for all employees.

Discussion: This employer did not have a written comprehensive safety program. Even small companies should evaluate the tasks done by workers to identify all potential hazards. The employer should then develop and implement a safety program addressing these hazards, provide worker training in safe work procedures and implement appropriate control measures.

Lyle E. McKenzie  
Chief Investigator/Industrial Hygienist  
Environmental Epidemiology Division  
Occupational Epidemiology Program