

The North Carolina Gold Star Grower Program

Regina Cullen

Agriculture provides employment and income to more than 20 million people nationwide and to more than 800,000 here in North Carolina. It's an industry that can exact a powerful cost: farm machinery, agricultural chemicals, grain bins, and farm animals all can place those working in agriculture in a danger zone, both in the working environment as well as in living conditions. During 2007, hired farm labor was reported on 482,186 (22%) of the nation's farms and ranches. North Carolina, 1 of 9 states that account for just over half of all workers hired directly by farm operators, has made efforts to highlight agricultural danger zones.

The North Carolina legislature enacted the Migrant Housing Act (MHA) of North Carolina, which took effect in 1990. The MHA consolidated the inspection of migrant housing in the North Carolina Department of Labor (NCDOL) and updated housing inspection standards. In addition to enforcing the Occupational Safety and Health Administration migrant housing regulations—the Temporary Labor Camp Standard (29 CFR 1910.142)—the MHA added fire protection, heating, kitchen sanitation, and hot water requirements. Field sanitation provisions were expanded to apply to all individuals providing migrant housing. Housing owners or operators who provide housing to 1 or more migrant worker must register the housing with NCDOL 45 days before the workers take occupancy. Water and septic systems are required to be inspected by the local county health departments.

For many North Carolina growers, this legislation was not an easy pill to swallow. Before the MHA, growers had been subject to other rules, enforced by other agencies, and did not come under inspection unless they housed more than 10 farmworkers. But for advocates, the MHA did not go far enough.

The North Carolina Gold Star Grower program began in the early 1990s as a response to the inspection process. Some growers complained, "Why are you inspecting me? I meet all the requirements! There are folks down the road that NEED your inspection. I don't! I work hard to keep this house right!" Office staff and inspectors noticed this, as well, commenting, "Some housing is always in great shape. What can we do to acknowledge the growers' efforts?" Inspectors observed that some growers provided housing that exceeded the MHA requirements: installing telephones or providing appliances such as microwave ovens and freezers.

Such discussions led one staffer to remark, "Remember back in school, when we'd get a gold star on our papers?" The Gold Star Grower program began with simple thank you notes, blue cards with a gold star in the corner, sent to those whose housing met all the requirements of the MHA. In 1992, there were 136 Gold Star Growers (13% of those inspected).

NCDOL held the first recognition luncheon in 1994 and

has held them annually ever since. In the beginning, these events took place in various locations throughout the state, including Kernersville, Wilson, Lexington, Farmville, Mount Olive, and Greenville. Hosts included North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension agents: Mark Tucker, in Forsyth County, and Tom Campbell, in Pasquotank County. Commodity groups—cucumber, tobacco, blueberry, Christmas trees—are supporters. Growers who receive 2 consecutive stars are then eligible to conduct their own housing inspections the following year. They must attend the luncheon, continue to register their housing, and have their water and septic systems inspected.

Two-way communication proved beneficial: problems discussed at Gold Star luncheon meetings included farm safety issues. The danger zone expanded from housing issues to the farm field and beyond. In 1998, driving farm equipment on rural roadways was the topic Gold Star Growers considered their "most serious workplace safety problem." Solutions included grant money from the Governor's Highway Safety Program to fund educational programs and to provide all registered growers with slow moving vehicle signs for their farm vehicles. Billboards with tractors and the slogan "Slow Moving" were posted in a number of rural counties, drawing attention to the problem. North Carolina State Cooperative Extension worked with NCDOL to promote Light & Reflect, the safety program developed as a result of this initiative. Other agricultural safety initiatives include workplace safety DVDs, in English and Spanish, filmed on Gold Star farms. Safety topics include pesticide information, heat stress/stroke recognition and prevention, and machine guarding. At present, a housing DVD is in production. Topics include fire prevention, bathroom sanitation, electrical issues, and maintenance. The DVDs, distributed to all growers who register their housing, are used to conduct on-site farm training.

Our belief is that all agriculture-related illnesses, injuries, and fatalities are preventable. The Gold Star Grower program addresses the health and safety of the agricultural workforce by viewing it from multiple perspectives: grower, farmworker, and safety professional. The Gold Star list keeps growing; the program has proven to be an effective initiative for the growers and the state. Permitting growers who have earned the right to self-inspect allows the Agricultural Safety and Health Bureau to focus resources on unregistered camps and on growers who need intervention. NCMJ

Regina Cullen bureau chief, Agricultural Safety and Health Bureau, North Carolina Department of Labor, Raleigh, North Carolina.

Address correspondence to Regina Cullen, NC Department of Labor, 1101 Mail Service Ctr, Raleigh, NC 27699-1101 (regina.cullen@labor.nc.gov).

farmworkers employed in other regions of the country, but little research has been conducted on these effects in North Carolina.

Three hazards are particularly critical for North Carolina

farmworkers. Heat stress is common among farmworkers, because of the state's high temperatures in July and August [3]. These high temperatures are magnified by the physical exertion of farm labor, which often occurs within the enclo-