

Protecting Farmworkers From Extreme Heat and Wildfire Smoke Helps the U.S. Economy

Farmworkers are [essential](#) workers who provide food to families across the country and fuel the U.S. economy with their work. As climate change exacerbates extreme [events](#) like [heatwaves](#) and [wildfires](#), these workers face elevated health risks and even death, given these labor-intensive jobs are mostly done outdoors. Many farmworkers work through these dangerous [conditions](#) for very [little pay](#). Democrats in Congress and the Biden-Harris administration are responding to these conditions by expanding farmworker [protections](#) around [heat](#) and mitigating [wildfire](#) risks while also supporting farmworkers' labor [rights](#). Together, these efforts will help make sure farmworkers are safe, healthy, and able to support their families without risking their lives on the job.

Farmworkers are essential to the U.S. economy, but lack labor protections guaranteed to nearly all other workers.

- Farmworkers fuel the agricultural sector, a major sector of the economy, which, along with its related industries, added a [total](#) of \$1.53 trillion to U.S. GDP in 2023 alone.
- Over two million [farmworkers](#) were recognized as essential workers during the pandemic.
- Despite these significant contributions, farmworkers lack many legal [protections](#) provided to other U.S. [workers](#), including protections for organizing.
- A [majority](#) of farm laborers are Latino, and [many](#) are living in underserved communities.
- An estimated [75%](#) are immigrants who can be especially [vulnerable](#) to [exploitation](#).
- While employers face labor [shortages](#), agricultural work remains [poorly](#) paid, leaving people to work long hours in harsh conditions just to make ends meet.

Farmworkers are especially vulnerable to the impacts of extreme heat.

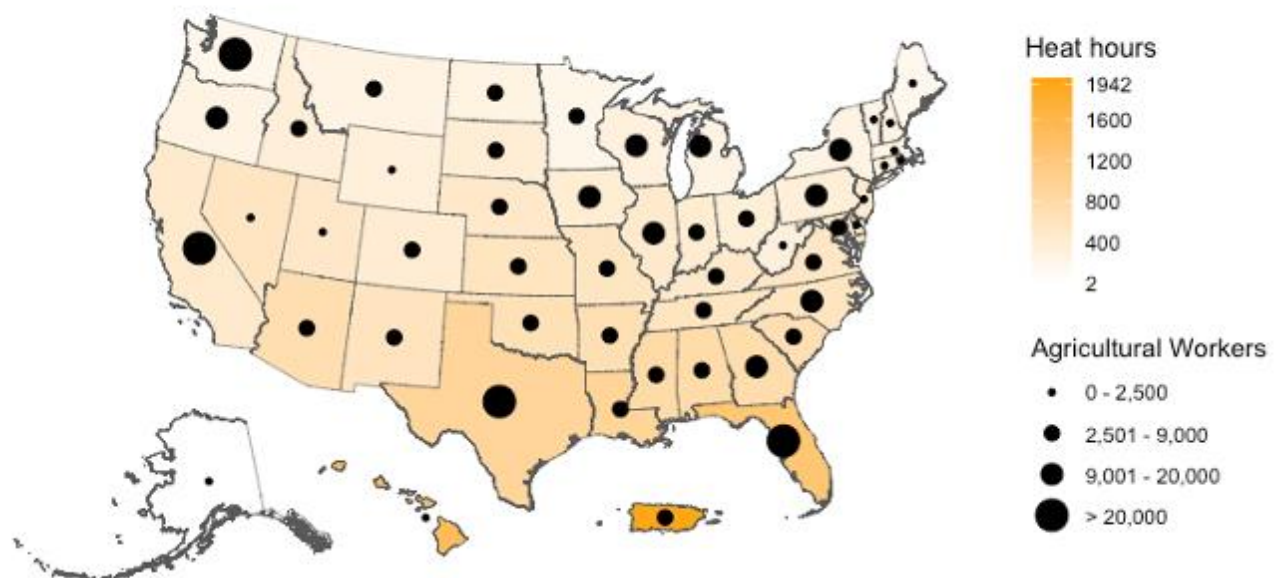
- Rising [temperatures](#) and increased heatwaves due to climate change heighten farmworkers' risk of heat-related [illnesses](#) from strenuous outdoor work.
- Latino farmworkers are especially at risk of exposure to dangerous heat levels. For example, Latinos make up over [90%](#) of [farmworkers](#) in California, where many counties are particularly [exposed](#) to extreme heat.
- Agricultural [workers](#) are 35 times more likely than other workers to die from heat-related illnesses. While studies estimate that heat [exposure](#) kills an average of 33 U.S. workers each year, this is likely a low estimate given the difficulty in measuring heat-related deaths.
- The average worker in agriculture is [exposed](#) to 21 unsafe heat days working in the summer, with this number likely to grow due to climate change.
- Farmworkers face acute [challenges](#) in accessing health care to treat the health consequences of extreme heat. Employer [practices](#) that [deny](#) adequate shade, clean water, or breaks for workers further exacerbate workers' health challenges.
- Annual labor [losses](#)—meaning foregone work hours—due to heat exposure amount to over \$90 billion.

Wildfire smoke also poses risks to farmworkers.

- While outdoors, [many](#) workers are exposed to [toxic](#) wildfire smoke, which is as much as ten times as [harmful](#) to human health as particles from other sources like car pollution.
- Wildfire severity and smoke [exposure](#) has already increased due to climate change and is expected to get worse in upcoming years. This will further raise the risk of respiratory and cardiovascular illness and related deaths among farmworkers.
- Many farmworkers have no choice but to work in these dangerous [conditions](#) in order to earn a wage and support their families.
- A recent study showed that Latino and Native populations were exposed to [disproportionately](#) more air pollution alert days associated with wildfire smoke in California compared to other racial and ethnic groups.
- One [study](#) estimates that wildfire smoke exposure reduces annual labor income by \$125 billion per year, with a significant decline in income from crop production.

Farmworkers Across the U.S. Work Hundreds of Hours a Year in Extreme Heat

Average Annual Hours Exceeding Initial Heat Triggers, Daytime Shift, 2020-2022 average



Note: Black circles indicate the number of agricultural workers per state in 2022.

Source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, [Occupational Safety and Health Administration](#), ACS 2022

The new proposed federal protections around extreme heat in the workplace will help keep workers safe during extreme heat events.

- The Department of Labor's (DOL) Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) recently proposed a [rule](#) that would protect millions of workers, including farmworkers, from extreme heat in the workplace.
- This rule would establish [guidelines](#) to identify heat risks and provide protection from heat through acclimatization, breaks, and access to water and shade.
- OSHA has determined that this proposed standard is necessary to protect workers and is also economically [feasible](#) to implement.

- There are currently no federal heat-related protections for workers and very few state laws [protecting](#) workers from these dangerous working conditions. More than 500,000 farmworkers could [benefit](#) from this rule, which would help mitigate heat effects and lower the risk of heat-related illness and death.

Together, the Biden-Harris administration, JEC Chairman Heinrich, and Congressional Democrats are taking steps to ensure farmworkers' health and safety.

- JEC Chairman Heinrich introduced the [Office of Colonias and Farmworker Initiatives Establishment Act](#) with Senator Lujan, which would enhance farmworkers' and colonia residents' access to USDA programs.
- The [Asunción Valdivia Heat Illness and Fatality Prevention Act](#), led by Senators Brown, Padilla, and Cortez-Masto and co-sponsored by Chairman Heinrich, would codify OSHA's enforcement of worker protections against extreme heat. Sen. Padilla's [Fairness for Farm Workers Act](#) would also codify overtime pay for farmworkers.
- In addition to the OSHA rule, the Biden-Harris DOL [issued](#) the Farmworker Protection Rule, shielding immigrants with H-2A visas from the risk of exploitation by their employers.
- In 2022, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) created a new [office](#) dedicated to working with medical [examiners](#) and coroners to improve the quality of mortality data, including following wildfires or heatwaves.

There is still work to be done to protect farmworkers.

Passing the legislation detailed above and implementing the new proposed federal rules are just a few steps towards protecting farmworkers. Additional appropriations and coordination across the CDC, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) are essential to better understand how heat and wildfire smoke contribute to farmworker deaths. [Hazard](#) pay during extreme weather events and basic health [screenings](#) would also support the workers that put food on our tables. Further, the Wage and Hour Division at the DOL, responsible for investigating violations of farmworker health and safety protections, is [understaffed](#) and in [need](#) of additional appropriations.

A lack of sufficient [research](#) and data makes it difficult to pinpoint the true number of farmworkers affected by heat and wildfires or the costs that they face. Improved data on where and when wildfire smoke will intensify can act as an early warning system for farmworkers.

Organizers like the United Farm Workers (UFW) have been fighting for farmworkers' equal rights for decades. Though the National Labor Relations Act [continues](#) to exclude farmworkers from a series of federal protections, the UFW has achieved key state-level changes, including organizing [protections](#), and rules [protecting](#) workers from wildfire smoke hazards. Farmworkers in Oregon also recently [won](#) a state-mandated relief fund for those who miss work due to wildfire smoke or illness from extreme heat. These major wins can act as models for federal-level changes that allow the people who produce our food supply equal protection under our laws.

By protecting farmworkers we support the hardworking people whose health and safety is central to a strong U.S. economy.