



Home, Interrupted

Harvest of Shame: Deadly Heat Edition

In July of 2023, Efraín López García died picking fruit on a farm in Homestead, Florida. According to his family, extreme heat caused his death. At the same time, the Florida legislature was considering a bill banning local governments from enacting safety regulations to protect farmworkers. About 75 percent of farmworkers in the United States are immigrants. Allison Salerno reports on community organizations and scientists who are working to protect farmworkers from extreme heat in the absence of government protections.

Iggy Monda: In 1960, the renowned journalist Edward R. Murrow shocked the nation with a nearly-hour long CBS special report. Harvest of Shame, as it was called, revealed the harsh living and working conditions of farmworkers in America, an often invisible and underpaid workforce.

CBS Harvest of Shame: Every year, as predictable as the seasons, there are accidents resulting in death and serious injury to these laborers. The migrants have no lobby. The people you have seen have the strength to harvest your fruit and vegetables. They do not have the strength to influence legislation. Maybe we do.

From Feet in 2 Worlds, this is Home, Interrupted, a podcast that examines the connection between immigrants and climate change. I'm Iggy Monda.

It's now been six decades, six U.S. manned moon landings and 13 presidents since Murrow's report. It would be natural to assume that conditions for farmworkers have improved over the years.

But in many places that is not the case. Farmwork today is more dangerous than ever, and it's because it's just getting too damn hot.

On today's episode, we take you to Florida, where Murrow did much of his reporting. It's a state where most of the farmworkers are immigrants, and it's a state that is dealing with numerous effects of climate change already—worsening hurricane seasons, coastal flooding, and heat.

For farmworkers, laboring in the hot sun can be deadly. But as reporter and producer Allison Salerno found, efforts to protect Florida's farmworkers from rising temperatures have met stiff resistance.

Allison Salerno: It's a warm January afternoon in Apopka, Florida, with temperatures rising into the 60s. Maria Pineda, an immigrant from El Salvador, waters tomato plants in a small greenhouse in a huerta or community garden. She's also putting scraps of food into the worm composting bin.

Maria Pineda: We have worms over there. I just step by the worms and feed the worms, and now I can put water here and we can check the grass.

Allison: What do you grow here? I see tomatoes.

Maria: We got tomatoes. We got savila, the aloe vera. We have a few tomatoes in here, but this grows by itself.

Allison: Maria volunteers her time in the huerta. It's a place where she gets to enjoy the pleasures of home gardening and of growing fruits and vegetables.

Maria: This is a little place to farm workers, to help the community, and here the people, they come in and share their ideas. So, like I am from Central America, and we have different ways to planting the fruits and vegetables. Mexico, they do things differently. But we try to share the knowledge. It empowers the community.

Allison: Maria worked at the Farmworker Association of Florida where she taught farmworkers how to protect themselves in extreme heat and how to handle pesticides, which she learned can worsen the effects of high temperatures.

Maria spent about 20 years as a farm laborer in Central Florida, mixing fertilizers in an indoor nursery greenhouse, 10 hours a day. Six days a week. When she left, her pay was 9 dollars and 50 cents an hour. No sick time, no vacation time, no health insurance. Health issues forced her to quit.

Maria: I'm scared when I go in the areas that are hot, but I need to put my mind. Yes, I'll be fine. But when you work, you are working and you're stressed. Sometimes I feel dizzy and I never relate it. Oh, maybe you eat something but you never relate it.

Allison: What Maria didn't relate was the connection between her health and the heat, and neither did her doctors. They just told her that personal stress was causing her head and body to ache, and for her to feel dizzy and nauseated every day. So she just kept working.

Maria: The day you don't work, you don't make money. I know I need to cover rent. And I am a mother like no husband. And I say I have to work every day, feel sick, it rains or whatever, it's hot. And they say just drink water. But sometimes, you know, if I drink water, and I need to go more to the bathroom, and I waste time and I know I don't make my production.

Allison: One day, when she finished her shift and went into an air-conditioned room, Maria could not stop sweating. Her skin was blotchy. She became disoriented. This kind of feeling had become Maria's normal, but that day she reached her breaking point.

Maria: my reflection in the mirror, I say what happened? My eyes so red, and it takes a long time for my body to be relaxed. And you drink water and the water doesn't

work. You feel thirsty. The water, they don't relieve you. And the next day I say uh-uh, I can't do it no more. That day was the most hot day there was.

Allison: Fleeing civil war in El Salvador in 1993, Maria traveled thousands of miles with the hopes of working to give her children a better life. She came to work, but the work she found became impossible to do because of the nearly unbearable heat. Still, she has no regrets about immigrating to the United States.

Maria: We coming to United States to work, we come with dreams, and we see because the way I was living in El Salvador, I don't have no choice. I can work, work, but I like to give something good to my daughters.

Allison: Did you tell your family, you said your mom and your daughter. Did you tell them the difficulties you were having in the United States?

Maria: No.

Allison: Why not?

Maria: Oh, because I don't want they worry.

Allison: Maria considers herself lucky that she got out before things got even hotter. But millions of farmworkers in the United States still face the dangers of working in increasingly hot temperatures.

CBS: South Florida's ongoing heatwave has turned deadly. A vigil was held today for a Homestead farmworker who according to his brother died from working outside in the intense heat.

Allison: In the summer of 2023, Efraín Lopez Garcia—an immigrant from Guatemala—died laboring in Homestead, Florida, a city 40 miles south of downtown Miami. He was 29.

2023 was the hottest year on record for Florida—and for the whole planet. That summer, temperatures in Miami topped 100 degrees Fahrenheit, for 46 days in a row. During that record-breaking run of high temperatures, Efraín was working in the open fields. He was picking longan, a tropical fruit harvested by hand, when he began to feel sick. Farmworkers across the state of Florida—like Mirella Contreras in Homestead—heard about Efraín's story via other farmworkers on social media and WhatsApp. She reached out to Efraín's family and shared what they told her. She told us how Efraín's cousin and others found his body. Mirella's daughter Elena translated.

Mirella Contreras: Pues reaccionaron en una cosa extra extravagante ocupados porque es como sabemos que habemos muchas personas que no sabemos

Elena Contreras: They kept checking up on him because he was feeling bad and they gave him like ice water. They sat him down in the shaded place and they were checking up on him. And Efraín was saying he was feeling a little bit better. And so the cousin decided to go back to work and whenever he would go check up on him again, he wasn't there. So, he went and look for him. And that's whenever they found him unconscious, laying down on the floor And after they found him like that, they called 911. And The paramedics told him that he had passed away.

Allison: Mirella is the area organizer at the Homestead office of the Farmworker Association. She helped organize a vigil and helped raise money to send Efraín's body back to Guatemala. Mirella connected with Efraín's family, and shared what they told her.

Elena: So at first they were really sad because he died alone. So, there was nobody to claim his body. And then after the family like found out why it happened and everything they were kinda scared for other people. They were scared that a farm worker they don't know how to protect themselves.

Allison: Mirella is also a former farmworker who knows about unrelenting heat.

Mirella: Sí, últimamente estos años han estado más calientes porque a veces el viento se sentía poquito cuando corría y refrescaba. Pero ahora no ahora hasta el viento llega caliente.

Elena: She has experienced Florida getting warmer because before when she would be working or just being here, she felt like the wind kind of made it a little bit cooler, but now like the summers even the wind feels so hot. Everything is just always hot.

Allison: Days after Efraín's death, commissioners in Miami-Dade proposed a county ordinance that would have made it the nation's only local government to protect outdoor workers from the heat. It would have required employers in Miami-Dade to have first aid and emergency procedures. And it would have required workers be given water and rest breaks in the shade—specifically, 10 minutes every two hours on very hot days.

But that local bill never made it out of committee.

However, a few months later, the Florida state legislature went to work on a bill that would prevent Miami-Dade—or any local government in Florida — from regulating working conditions for farmworkers. State representative Tiffany Esposito, from Fort Myers, introduced the bill.

Esposito told a subcommittee that businesses need to be the ones deciding how to operate—including the working conditions of their employees.

Representative Tiffany Esposito: I think a free market approach is the best approach for any business decision. I am a free market supporter through and through, and I think that this bill is doing just that

Allison: Among the supporters of the bill are the Florida Chamber of Commerce and lobbyists representing fruit and vegetable growers and landscape companies.

Representative Esposito: The way that local governments are requiring employers to pay more and pay maybe more than what the market can allow, and we are requiring them to offer a certain amount of benefits, all that's doing is driving up the cost of doing business, which ultimately ends on the consumer.

Allison: Supporters of Esposito's bill argue that heat safety laws need to be handled on the state or federal - not local level. But the federal government has no laws regulating the safety of workers in extreme heat and neither does the state of Florida.

Representative Anna Eskamani: Lawmakers in this legislature continue to ignore this issue.

Allison: That's State Representative Anna Eskamani of Orlando.

Representative Eskamani: And what's worse is that they are pursuing policies that would tie the hands of local governments from setting any type of protections for heat stress.

Allison: Eskamani says Efraín's death should have been a wakeup call to protect all Florida's farmworkers.

Representative Eskamani: This is a heartbreaking story of a farmworker that lost his life to heat stress. And as Florida becomes hotter, we're going to see more of these stories come to fruition, even though it's preventable, that we can't put into place protections for heat stress.

Allison: Florida is not alone in blocking efforts to protect farmworkers. In 2023, Texas passed a law banning local governments from requiring water breaks for outdoor workers.

According to the Occupational Safety & Health Administration, there are only five states with laws protecting farm workers and other outdoor workers from extreme heat. Agricultural powerhouse California was the first to pass outdoor heat standards — in 2005. And it's been strengthening those protections ever since.

But, in the absence of government protections, in states like Florida and Texas, what can be done to protect farmworkers?

Iggy: We're gonna take a quick break. When we get back....we'll hear about non-government efforts to protect farmworkers from heat. Stay tuned for more Home, Interrupted.

Ad Break

Iggy: This is Home, Interrupted from Feet in 2 Worlds. Before the break, you heard the tragic story of Efraín López García—the farmworker who died working on a farm in Homestead, Florida under intense heat.

Stories like Efraín's are not isolated. And yet in spite of an increasingly brutal sun, farm owners, the state of Florida and the federal government have not kept pace with the effects of climate change. Regulations to help protect these workers has largely not evolved since 1960, when Edward R. Murrow's report was broadcast. So for the second act of this story, reporter Allison Salerno goes directly to the science to find out what has been learned about the impact of heat on farmworkers, and what methods are available to protect them. Here's Allison.

Allison: In the absence of government protections, scientists and community organizers are trying to come up with strategies to protect farm workers as temperatures rise.

One person at the forefront of those efforts is Dr. Roxana Chicas, a nursing professor at Emory University in Georgia. She's been researching the health effects of extreme heat on farmworkers for about 14 years.

Dr. Roxana Chicas: One of the reasons why I became interested in this work is that farm workers, the majority of them, are immigrants. They're from Latin

America. There's about three million in the United States, and it is estimated that 50 to 70 percent of them are undocumented workers.

And so I share a very similar background with them. My mother brought me to the United States, also in search for a job and to give me a better life, and I lived as an undocumented person until I was 18-years-old. And so I understand how it is to live with such a precarious immigration status and how you don't want to rock the boat, you do what you can so that you are able to put food on your table and you just want to work.

Allison: Chicas says both farmworkers and farm owners have misconceptions about working in the fields.

Dr. Chicas: There is kind of this notion amongst workers and growers that working outside in the heat in agriculture, it's a harsh environment. It is what it is and there's nothing that can be done. But I think that's a false notion. I think that we can find evidence-based solutions to protect workers. And I am sure that growers want to protect workers because nobody wants their workers dying.

Allison: Chicas began her research into farmworker health in 2012. At the time, less than half of Americans said global warming was a serious problem requiring immediate government attention. And so when Chicas and her team asked farmworkers what health risks they were most worried about, they were surprised by their answers.

Dr. Chicas: We as researchers thought that they would tell us that they were going to be interested in how pesticide is affecting them // And when we did the focus group, the farm workers told us that they were interested in how heat was affecting them.

Allison: Chicas' team switched its focus. They gave the farm workers they were studying sensors to swallow that captured their internal temperature every 30 seconds.

The monitors showed that workers' temperatures were reaching dangerously high levels long before the day had reached its hottest point. Workers were showing fever-like symptoms – headaches, dizziness and muscle cramps.

Dr. Chicas: And they're hitting that threshold like around eight or nine o'clock in the morning.

Allison: But that wasn't the most concerning finding to Chicas.

Dr. Chicas: Just over the course of one work shift workers were developing acute kidney injury.

Allison: One third of the farmworkers they monitored had acute kidney damage that can be directly associated with exposure to extreme heat.

Dr. Chicas: Kidneys – to function very well – need to be very hydrated. But if they're dehydrated and they're working really hard in the heat, the kidneys start suffering and they start having this acute kidney injury.

Allison: While farm workers might not realize how the hot sun affects kidneys, they do know the heat is bad for them. But despite their physical discomfort, they keep working. Because if they want to get paid, they have to.

And so we end up with stories like Efraín's. Efraín wasn't the first farmworker to die in the heat. And he may not be the last. The federal government estimates 40 outdoor workers die each year due to extreme heat. But there is no unified data collection system in the United States for tracking those deaths, and farmworker advocates say those deaths are grossly underreported. Some claim thousands of outdoor workers are dying annually. The National Institutes of Health does estimate farmworkers are 35 times more likely to die from heat exposure than other workers.

Chicas was not surprised by Efraín's death. She's not surprised by any of these deaths.

Dr. Chicas: They are at the front line of a lot of climate change and these extreme weathers. And you can see in real time how the body responds to these extreme weather events.

Allison: Once Chicas' team saw how much high temperatures were hurting farmworkers, they tried to figure out ways to help workers manage. But what could workers do to not get so hot? Sometimes, they don't want to stop to drink water because that would mean more bathroom breaks. And in the fields, unless your boss gives you that break as part of your paid shift, time off to go to the bathroom means losing income.

So part of Chicas' challenge was to find ways to limit the effect of heat when people are doing physical labor but also to not introduce anything that would interfere with productivity, otherwise the workers won't use it. Option number one: They tried getting workers to wear cooling vests with ice packets inside. The trouble was, those vests were too bulky to be practical.

Dr. Chicas: Agricultural workers move a lot. There's a lot of bending and twisting and it can't be uncomfortable on them.

Allison: Option number two: cooling bandanas. You wet them, wring them out and put them around your neck. Workers liked how lightweight the bandanas were. And the bandanas cooled down the blood vessels in their necks.

Dr. Chicas: So, the blood that was going to the brain was getting cooled. And that's really important because when you go into heat stroke, what you're really having is an impact to your brain.

Allison: The third option that Chicas' team found that worked for farmworkers was to drink water with added electrolytes. It had a measurable effect.

Dr. Chicas: The electrolyte group, nobody developed acute kidney injury

Allison: Maria, the former farmworker, ran workshops to teach laborers how to cope with heat. She told us she's not sure if most farmworkers in Florida know about and are using these interventions. But she knows the difficulty of balancing one's health and one's bank account especially when you have to deal with record-breaking heat. For Chicas, the lack of attention to farmworker health means people are ignoring their contributions.

Dr. Chicas: How sad is it that they're the ones that are picking the fruits and vegetables that we eat, but have little left for themselves. We benefit from their labor every day, and yet we don't take care of them.

Allison: The people who pick the food we eat, people like Maria and Mirella, are among the most poorly paid workers in the United States. The average farmworker earns between \$17,500 and \$20,000 a year. Federal law explicitly excludes them from overtime pay. Many fear deportation if they complain about their working conditions.

In the end, it cost more to bury Efraín Lopez Garcia than he ever earned in a year. Mirella Contreras—the former farmworker who helped organize his vigil—told us it cost more than \$13,000 to fly his body back to Guatemala so his mother could lay him to rest. Efrain earned less than \$12,000 a year in Florida picking fruits and vegetables and chasing his American Dream.

Maria Pineda, who left farmwork due to how heat and fertilizers were affecting her health, thinks a lot about Efraín. She thinks about how, with the rising temperatures in Florida, she’s lucky she was able to leave farmwork. And she worries about the choices facing others who are still working in the fields.

Maria: I don't know what is the solution, but if we stop working, we need hands to produce those vegetables.

Allison: Maria visits the community huerta when she can, to enjoy time tending to the tomato plants, the mint, the cabbage and the papaya trees. She can let her mind wander because she isn’t under the pressure of paid farmwork.

Maria: I feel free. I feel, well, I prayed the little tomatoes coming out faster. You know, we see a little blooming. So, I be here and enjoy this little time, free time

Allison: As I was walking back to my van after talking with Maria, she handed me a passion fruit from the huerta. She said she can’t touch a piece of fruit or a vegetable without thinking about the hands that picked them.

Maria: I see the fruits and I see the people, the work, the hands they touch the fruit, those vegetable.

Allison: The US produces more fruits and vegetables today than back in 1960, when Murrow’s special report aired. But because of climate change, the dangers of farm labor have increased.

Despite the lack of laws protecting them, despite opposition to even basic safety measures, and despite risks to their health, farmworkers continue to labor.

But as temperature records are broken, and as the demand to feed a growing global population intensifies, farmworkers also continue to ask, “What about us?”

Iggy: On April 12, just a few days before this episode aired, Florida's Governor Ron DeSantis signed HB433, Representative Tiffany Esposito's bill, into state law. What that means is that local governments in the state of Florida are now barred from mandating heat protections for outdoor workers, such as water breaks and shade.

This story was written and produced for Feet in 2 Worlds by Allison Salerno. It was mixed and mastered by our technical director Jocelyn Gonzales. Quincy Surasmith is our managing editor. Alejandro Salazar Dyer is our director of marketing, and Shreya Agrawal is our intern. Julie Schwietert Collazo was our fact checker. The Managing Director of Feet in 2 Worlds is Mia Warren. John Rudolph is Feet in 2 Worlds' founder and is Executive Producer of this series.

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Home, Interrupted comes to you from Feet in 2 Worlds. Since 2004, Feet in 2 Worlds has been telling the stories of today's immigrants and training immigrant journalists. The Feet in 2 Worlds network includes hundreds of reporters and editors. Some, like me, have been Feet in 2 Worlds fellows. Others have attended our workshops and contributed to our podcast and website. Together, we're making American journalism more reflective of the diverse communities that we serve.

You can find links to additional stories in the series in our episode notes. To listen to earlier episodes of Home, Interrupted, visit F i 2 W.org. That’s F, i, the number 2, W.org.

I’m Iggy Monda, Editorial Fellow with Feet in 2 Worlds. If you like the show, thank you, we love you. Please keep listening and please leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen to your stories.

Quincy Surasmith:

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