Dairy Worker Safety Fatality File

Lazaro Alvarez, 39, was working in a barn at Flanagan Farms in Chenango County last September when a bull charged toward him, slamming Alvarez against metal bars that encircle the cows' sleeping area.

"I went flying against the metal bars, face down" Alvarez recalled in Spanish. "The blow was really, really intense."

When the owner fended off the bull and picked up Alvarez, his face was covered in blood.

While bulls are notoriously dangerous there are many other ways to get injured or die on a dairy farm.

Farmers and workers fall into manure pits or can get entangled in skid steers, small tractor-like vehicles for moving feed and materials. Workers are sometimes trapped or crushed in equipment such as manure spreaders and corn choppers.

Farmers say that accidents happen because they're rushing or don't take precautions in a job where they're working with large animals, heavy equipment and noxious chemicals.

"Farming is a wonderful way of life but it does have its risks," said Crystal Grimaldi of Ideal Farms, a Washington County dairy farm. Grimaldi is the office manager and several relatives also work on the farm. She recalled an incident years ago where her father experienced a chemical burn in his eye while cleaning the milking parlor.

"He certainly knew the risks," Grimaldi said. "Sometimes accidents still happen."

The Workers' Center of Central New York, an advocacy group based in Syracuse, is leading a campaign for more OSHA oversight of state dairy farms.

“If you’re an owner, you take risks, fine,” said Rebecca Fuentes, a member of the group. But she said it’s different for dairy workers, many of whom are undocumented immigrants.

“Workers won’t complain because it’s the culture of the job,” she said. “It’s like, you’re going to get hurt and that’s it.”

Fuentes said workers aren’t trained properly, may not have protective equipment and work very long hours, often without a day off. In part, that’s because New York farm workers are not entitled to days off or overtime pay.

Alvarez, an undocumented immigrant from Mexico, was working on the Chenango County farm for a few weeks when he was attacked by the bull. He spent a night in the hospital with a broken jaw and a torn tear duct that required stitches below his right eye. For several months, he took prescription painkillers for injuries to his ribs and shoulder, where the bull head-butted him. He said he was fired after the accident and now works at a farm north of Fonda. The owner of the farm where Alvarez was injured could not be reached for comment.