

Florida

Citrus Workers Start Wearing Protective Glasses to Prevent Eye Injuries

Producing Results

Crews of Latino migrant workers in Florida's citrus groves are now wearing safety glasses to protect their eyes from injuries, thanks to the consent and aid of the citrus companies and an innovative intervention from the University of South Florida's Prevention Research Center. Use of safety glasses has increased from 8% prior to the intervention to 30% after, compared to a steady rate of 4% for the control group. In Florida, citrus production is a \$9 billion industry, and keeping the workers safe is in the best interest of the economy, the employers, the workers, and their families.

Public Health Problem

Agricultural workers may get eye injuries from exposure to chemicals, dusts, and plant material as well as exposure to ultraviolet (UV) rays in sunlight. Eye injuries cost \$300 million each year in medical expenses and lost work time (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2003). Wearing safety glasses is an easy method to protect the eyes, is cost-effective, and can prevent about 90% of injuries.

Taking Action

The University of South Florida's Prevention Research Center (PRC) has trained about 3 dozen citrus workers to educate crews of orange pickers about the proper use of safety glasses and encourage their use. The trainees also learn to give eyewashes out in the citrus groves to aid workers who get sand or debris in their eyes. Throughout the season, the PRC pays these safety promoters \$50 a week for their efforts and for debriefing weekly with a researcher from the university. The program is now in its fourth season, and researchers are walking through the orange groves to count the number of workers wearing safety glasses. The safety promoters have reached about 1,000 workers.

Implications and Impact

Usage has increased from 8% of workers wearing the glasses before the intervention to 30% after. (The control group has held steady at 4%.) In interviews with the citrus workers, however, the researchers learned of the workers' dissatisfaction with the available eyewear, which scratch easily, need frequent cleaning, are not very durable, fog up in the hot and humid climate, and lack UV protection. Using funds from a federally sponsored Small Business Innovative Research mechanism, the PRC is now partnering with commercial firms to develop a prototype for economical, scratch-resistant, anti-fog, self-cleaning lenses that offer UV protection. If the pilot test is successful, the partners will advance to mass production, dissemination, and evaluation of the safety glasses with a large sample of Florida citrus workers.