

Health violation found at Salem mushroom farm

Farmworker union says report 'further substantiates' what workers have been saying all along

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SALEM — The Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Division discovered a health violation at Pictsweet Mushroom Farm in Salem after a month-long inspection.

The farm, owned by United Foods Inc. of Bells, Tenn., has no system in place to address the hazard of eye strain experienced by workers picking mushrooms, OR-OSHA found.

As a result, the division of the Oregon Department of Consumer & Business Services has proposed a \$100 penalty.

OR-OSHA proposed \$7,475 in penalties against the farm late last month after finding 13 safety violations there, nine of which were classified as "serious."

The company appealed the safety-violation citations June 13, said OR-OSHA's Steve Corson. The agency will soon schedule a conference with the employer to see "what they have to bring to the table," he said. If no agreement is reached, the case goes to the formal appeals process before the workers' compensation board and an administrative law judge. The safety violation could be withdrawn, the penalties could be modified or everything could stand as is.

The company may also appeal the health-violation citation by June 28.

United Foods' Senior Vice President of Administration Don Dresser declined to comment about the appeals processes. He said he didn't know much about the health-violation citation, except that the farm has used the

same lighting techniques for 50 years.

"And that's the way every other mushroom farm, almost, operates," he said. "That's just the way it's been done for 50 years and this is the first time I'm aware of that OSHA has indicated it might be an issue."

It's also the first time workers have raised the lighting issue, Dresser said.

Both the safety and the health inspections were the result of anonymous complaints filed with OR-OSHA on April 13, Corson said.

The health violation, made public June 8, involves the farm's lack of provisions to address workers' eye strain caused after 12 hours of picking mushrooms with a battery-powered head lamp.

"The intensity of the light diminishes by the last few hours of their picking time," reads OR-OSHA's citation. "Employees experienced dizziness, redness and pain in their eyes. Symptoms were experienced by 75 (percent) of employees interviewed."

Complainants also said some battery packs were leaking liquid that burns holes in workers' pants, causing rashes on their legs, according to OR-OSHA documents. While inspectors found four workers who experienced this problem, only one had reported it. And the company had since corrected the problem.

Other unfounded complaints include concerns that water on the floors contains pesticides and "stinks," hot water pipes exposed near mushroom pickers and "badly oxidated" drinking fountains.

OR-OSHA Safety Compliance Officer Karen Golik noted evi-

dence that indicated the lack of hazard assessment and control in her report.

"The issues of concern demonstrated a lack of empowerment amongst the pickers," Golik wrote. "There was a general disconnect between the pickers and management. Employees were hesitant to bring up concerns or recommendations, either for fear of reprisal, or that they felt nothing would be done. A result of the failure to bring issues forward was that unaddressed concerns "then became issues of distrust."

An "overwhelming majority" of Pictsweet's Salem workers have asked the Woodburn-based farmworker labor union Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United to represent them, said Collective Bargaining Committee Coordinator Erik Nicholson. The union is also known by its Spanish acronym, PCUN.

Nicholson said in a press release that OR-OSHA's report "further substantiates what workers at Pictsweet mushrooms have been saying all along, that their physical well being is being jeopardized by the substandard conditions in the plant."

PCUN is "organizing an action" at the Pictsweet plant as part of the larger March for Farmworker Justice taking place in Western Oregon. It will be held at 5:30 p.m. Saturday. The farm is at 255 Cordon Rd. NE, in Salem.

Dresser declined to comment about whether United Foods recognized PCUN's representation of Pictsweet workers, saying "we don't like to comment about internal operations."

About PCUN's rally and hints of calling for a boycott of Pictsweet products, Dresser said: "We're 100 percent behind their constitutional right to assemble and to free speech."