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Increasing Hazard Pay and Civic Education among Farmworkers: The Impact of the Climate Crisis on Agricultural Workers in Napa and Sonoma

A Policy Brief by Carlos Manuel Santana

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Image from [North Bay Jobs with Justice](#)

Background

The history of farmworkers' rights in California has tended to focus on the Central Valley and the actions of activists such as César Chávez and Dolores Huerta. The North Bay Area and its wine industry in the Napa and Sonoma valleys are regions that are left out of the wider history of

¹ Based at UC Berkeley's Institute of Governmental Studies, the Cal-in-Sacramento Fellowship Program sends approximately 30 Cal students to the state's capital every summer for eight-week public service internships. The Kenneth Burt Fellowship supports Cal-in-Sac Fellows whose individual research projects focus on issues affecting Latinx communities.

farmworkers' rights in California. Furthermore, farmworker communities have tended to be overlooked and seen as economic assets. The important contribution of Latinx and Indigenous communities within Napa Valley in the production of food and wineries is often ignored. Their erasure in the valley tourist narrative is critical since Latinx and Indigenous communities play a significant role in occupying and remaking the valley.² Beyond the tourist narrative of Napa and Sonoma are communities rich in activism, engaging with local organizations to advocate for better working conditions and assistance in front of county elected bodies. These communities, at the frontlines of the climate crisis, are fighting for resources necessary for agricultural workers in the North Bay to thrive.

This research sought to understand what civic actions have most effectively persuaded California legislators to vote in favor of Latinx and Indigenous farmworkers' compensation and well-being in the North Bay Area wine industry within the last ten years. Interviews with two local activists, a local organizer, and a local official from Sonoma County revealed that there is a major disconnect between Latinx and Indigenous farmworkers in the North Bay and state policymakers in Sacramento. Moreover, these communities need greater access to civic education resources so as to better coordinate and strengthen their demands to elected officials in the state capital, among which include language justice, hazard pay, and natural disaster insurance.³

² See Soto, "When César Chávez and Dolores Huerta Came to Napa," (<https://www.proquest.com/ethnicnewswatch/scholarly-journals/when-césar-chávez-dolores-huerta-came-napa/docview/2017375454/sem-2?accountid=14496>).

³ See North Bay Jobs with Justice (<https://www.northbayjobswithjustice.org/5-for-farmworkers-in-fires>).

“Immigrants do not come to America; America goes to other countries and gets people.”

The Farmworker Communities of Napa and Sonoma

A key insight and way to look at the movement of immigrants into the United States is to understand that, as one local activist notes, “Immigrants do not come to America; America goes to other countries and gets people.” This understanding is important because it is consistent when one looks at the general history of United States labor programs. For example, the Bracero Program of the 1940s sought to bring men from Mexico to work in different industries. However, the program can be seen as a major recruitment effort to bring more labor into the US.⁴

In regards to how big of a presence Latinx and Indigenous farmworker communities have in the North Bay Area, farmworkers do have a major presence. According to a local activist, between Napa, Cloverdale, and Mendocino, the population is 65-70% farmworkers. Furthermore, Indigenous communities have been less employed, more impoverished, and more situated in the area, meaning that it was not as feasible to move to another area to find work due to the established family ties. Indigenous people would also have to make an effort to blend in to get hired. For example, when seeking employment, Indigenous people would have to hide their Indigenous heritage and say they were Mexican or Chicano, due to the presence of laws that were very strict about not hiring Indigenous people of the Americas.

A major issue confronting farmworker communities is the climate crisis. Farmworkers will find themselves working in the presence of natural disasters. For example, farmworkers were the only people allowed behind evacuation zones during a major wildfire because they had to pick grapes. Because employers will have farmworkers work in the presence of natural hazards, such

⁴ See Loza, *Defiant Braceros: How Migrant Workers Fought for Racial, Sexual, and Political Freedom*, (<https://uncpress.org/book/9781469629766/defiant-braceros/>).

as wildfire smoke, one of the main demands farmworkers have is hazard pay so that they can be compensated if they risk their lives to save crops.

“We’ll all be impacted by the climate crisis, but they [farmworkers] are showing us actually how we all will be impacted. And we should really be paying attention to that, and listening to farmworkers, because what happens to farmworkers in the North Bay is a sneak preview of what’s going to happen to all of us as the impacts of the climate crisis worsen.”

The Disconnect with Sacramento

When immigrant communities, such as the farmworker communities of the North Bay, go to the state capital to advocate for their needs, they are met in a harsh environment in the legislative offices. As one activist said, activism in the state capital is not as empowering as at the local level. A day march in the North Bay with local bands, food, dancing, and cultural traditions allows people from these communities to feel more pride. When in a place like Sacramento, that positive climate disappears, and everyone feels disconnected from their elected officials. A local event is more empowering, and as one local organizer described it, these communities’ power is more potent at the local level.

Farmworkers engage in civic actions such as strikes, demonstrations, memberships in organizations, and attending government hearings. However, even with these civic actions, farmworkers need access to more inclusive civic education programs to close the gap, better advocate for their needs, and initiate a “force of presence” in Sacramento, as one activist explained.

Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations are for members of the California State Legislature and are focused on increasing civic education and financial assistance to immigrant and farmworker communities:

1. Policymakers should provide funding for day laborer centers or similarly structured organizations. These organizations, such as the [Graton Day Labor Center](#), take holistic approaches to civic education, such as creating programs that incorporate leadership training but also health support and care for laborers. Given this training and access to basic services, farmworkers can have a more coordinated response when they organize, as they have the support they need to prioritize their well-being but also to better engage in rights advocacy.⁵ With increased funding, these organizations can also expand their services and outreach.
2. Policymakers should invest time into the need for greater language justice by creating a [state department or office of language assistance](#). This agency can work with other agencies and local governments to require basic services, such as health support, emergency announcements, and workplace safety training, to be conducted in workers' and community members' preferred languages, including Indigenous languages.⁶
3. Policymakers should create a law requiring employers to provide hazard pay for farmworkers when they will be working in the presence of natural disasters or hazards,

⁵ See Graton Day Labor Center “About” page for more information (<https://gratondaylaborcenter.org/about/>).

⁶ This proposal is modeled after North Bay Jobs with Justice’s demand for greater language justice (<https://www.northbayjobswithjustice.org/5-for-farmworkers-in-fires>).

such as wildfire smoke. They need to be compensated for putting their lives, health, and safety at risk.⁷

4. Policymakers should also ensure that undocumented immigrants have access to unemployment insurance and that unemployment insurance is expanded to include natural disasters, given that natural disasters can happen and severely affect individuals who are uninsured and then can't find work due to the disaster. When crops are lost due to natural disasters, workers also lose jobs. They need to be compensated when this happens, just as growers are compensated when they lose their crops. The state should create a [Disaster Fund for Workers](#) to coordinate this initiative.⁸

⁷ Modeled after North Bay Jobs with Justice's demand for hazard pay (<https://www.northbayjobswithjustice.org/5-for-farmworkers-in-fires>).

⁸ This proposal is also modeled after North Bay Jobs with Justice's demand for disaster insurance (<https://www.northbayjobswithjustice.org/5-for-farmworkers-in-fires>).