

# "YOU CAN'T FIND A WAY OUT"

**The Wine Industry's Responsibility  
for Risks to Frontline Farmworkers**



Photo by Justin Sullivan/Getty

## For Sonoma County farmworkers on the frontlines of wildfires, smoke, extreme heat, and drought, staying home to stay safe is not a viable option

- Wine industry and government practices force farmworkers to work without hazard pay in extreme heat and dangerous smoke, which are associated with severe short- and long-term health harms, including difficulty breathing, chronic heart and lung illnesses, and death<sup>1-3</sup>
- Missing work to avoid these health risks means missing pay, which also has dire consequences to workers' health and economic security, and that of their families; furthermore, farmworkers who stay home to protect their health typically don't qualify for unemployment benefits<sup>4-7</sup>
- Nearly all of Sonoma County's farmworkers are from Latinx immigrant communities, and many are Indigenous, groups that hold thousands of years of ecological knowledge and wisdom about land stewardship; wage loss and exposure to working hazards continue a long legacy of discrimination, structural oppression, and legal exclusion that has made these communities especially vulnerable to harm<sup>7-12</sup>

### To promote safety, dignity, justice, and health equity for Indigenous and immigrant farmworkers:

- The companies in the wine industry should adopt **hazard pay** to appropriately compensate workers who put their safety at risk on the frontlines
- Local government should pass **disaster insurance** policy to cover lost wages from climate crises, which will mitigate economic stress and promote safety for workers
- Both local government and the wine industry should ensure **language justice** and respect for Indigenous workers by providing all safety and evacuation trainings in workers' first languages

In the summer of 2022, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors responded to farmworkers' demands by passing a policy that provides disaster insurance and language justice for some workers — but it only applies to those affected by evacuation zones. While this decision is a big win for farmworker safety, it's not enough. In the wake of this decision, there is renewed urgency for the wine industry to respond to the risks that farmworkers face by providing hazard pay when conditions are dangerous – regardless of whether there is an evacuation zone.

To learn about how climate crises and income loss affect workers, we surveyed 33 Sonoma County farmworkers, nearly all of whom work in the wine industry, and held a focus group with nine attendees.





Photo by Roberto (Bear) Guerra/  
Quiet Pictures

## Sonoma County farmworkers lose significant income during climate crises

The farmworkers we spoke with reported losing an average of **\$1,535** during a typical month in which work was impacted by severe climate conditions, with some workers losing up to **\$3,500**. Some even lost their jobs entirely after missing work (17%) and another third were not paid what they should have been due to smoke contamination of the crop, which is considered wage theft if employers withheld pay after workers picked the grapes (28%).

### **This loss takes a huge financial and emotional toll on workers.**

The average California-based agricultural worker earns \$17,445 annually, according to estimates, suggesting that the workers we spoke to may lose up to 20% of their annual income in a single month.<sup>13</sup> Late summer harvest, which is when farmworkers make the most income, coincides with wildfire season, heavy smoke, and extreme heat. Over a third of workers we spoke to (39%) felt the impact of climate-related income loss for months to come because of this.

## Income loss affects workers' wellbeing and ability to afford basic needs

The farmworkers we spoke to expressed that climate-related income loss impacted their ability to afford **rent** (72%), **food** (44%), **transportation** (28%), and **activities they enjoy** (33%). Academic research also shows that economic instability and income loss are associated with depression, anxiety, and poorer overall health, including higher rates of heart disease, diabetes, and stroke.<sup>4-6</sup>

*"Sadly we accept it because it is a season where we make some money... We have to make that money and save it for when they lay us off, because they are going to lay us off."*

— Cardenas  
Sonoma County Farmworker





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## Workers face an impossible trade off: sacrifice their safety or their paycheck

A majority of workers we talked to said they **always** go to work no matter the climate conditions (67%) — but most of those workers (61%) don't want to, citing financial pressure, employer pressure, or fear of job loss as the main reasons for going in. Almost a **quarter of workers** were forced to stay home because of sickness from extreme heat and smoke (21%).

## Working in hazardous conditions is a life or death matter<sup>14</sup>

Public health research indicates that short- and long-term health consequences of extreme heat and smoke include heat stroke, which can be fatal without emergency care; difficulty breathing; and chronic heart, lung, and muscular illnesses.<sup>1-3</sup> Farmworkers are **over 30 times more likely to die** from exposure to extreme heat, compared to workers in other US industries, because they cannot afford to miss a paycheck.<sup>15,16</sup>

*"I believe that having lived this situation affects every aspect — mentally, physically. Why? Because sometimes you can't find a way out, you realize that you are locked in a room with four walls, and you cannot find the door."*

— Hermilo  
Sonoma County Farmworker

## These harms continue a long legacy of structural oppression and injustice

Nearly all of Sonoma County farmworkers are Latinx immigrants, and most workers we spoke with identify as Indigenous (68%).<sup>8</sup> These communities experience multiple forms of structural violence, including racism, poverty, anti-immigrant sentiment, and a long legacy of legal exclusion (e.g., the 1935 National Labor Relations Act that prevented farmworkers from collective bargaining).<sup>7,9,10</sup> Indigenous communities face continued harms from genocide, colonialism, and land theft, alongside discrimination and cultural and linguistic isolation that make it difficult access rights and services, including health and safety information.<sup>12,17,18</sup> This also prevents Indigenous people from contributing thousands of years of ecological knowledge and wisdom about land stewardship to climate justice planning.<sup>11</sup>

*"Before, when the wildfires were burning, my lungs were damaged... My heart was no longer functioning, it was functioning at 50%. I was hospitalized."*

— Mendoza  
Sonoma County Farmworker





Photo by Roberto (Bear) Guerra/  
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## We're calling on companies in the wine industry to listen to immigrant and Indigenous workers

This year has seen powerful victories for farmworker safety and economic security. In summer of 2022, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors allocated \$3 million to a disaster fund for workers who lose work due to wildfires and voted to ensure language justice in safety training for workers affected by evacuation zones.<sup>19</sup> E&J Gallo Winery, one of the top ten largest growers in Sonoma County, committed to time-and-a-half hazard pay any time the AQI (Air Quality Index) is over 150, the level at which air becomes unhealthy for all groups, regardless of whether there is an evacuation zone.<sup>20,21</sup>

These are significant wins— and much more must be done to achieve justice for Sonoma County's farmworkers. In the face of ongoing and aggravating climate crises, \$3 million of disaster insurance is only a band-aid solution. E&J Gallo is just one company. And we need protections that apply beyond evacuation zones, because we know that extreme heat, smoke, and drought harm people's health no matter where they occur.

The entire wine industry, including wineries, growers, vineyard management companies and farm labor contractors, has an obligation to ensure fair working conditions for farmworkers and develop comprehensive, long-term, sustainable solutions in the face of climate change. **The time is now for Sonoma County's wine companies to listen to the workers who make it possible for their industry to exist.**

We are calling on the largest growers in Sonoma County, their management companies, and their subcontractors to join the movement by providing hazard pay for workers any time the AQI is above 150: Jackson Family Wines, TIAA/Silverado Investment Management Group, Treasury Wine Estates, Rodney Strong Vineyards, Constellation Brands, Sonoma-Cutrer Vineyards, Foley Family Wines, Sangiacomo Family Vineyards, Vintage Wine Estates, and Vino Farms.

*"We know that a day that we don't work is a day that we don't get paid, and we won't have money to pay for our expenses... We cannot say that we are not going to work because it's raining or because of the smoke, the air quality... We do not have that privilege."*

— Sandra  
Sonoma County Farmworker





Still from "Harvest Season,"  
Bernardo Ruiz/Quiet Pictures

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## About this project

This brief was created by **Human Impact Partners** and **North Bay Jobs for Justice**, who collaborated to document the ways that climate crises – including smoke, fires, extreme heat, and drought – impact Sonoma County farmworkers. The data on this fact sheet are based on a survey of 33 Sonoma County farmworkers and a focus group with nine farmworker attendees, both of which were conducted during Summer of 2022. Nearly all (94%) of those surveyed work in the wine industry.

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