**Published in Der Tagesspiegel, Berlin, Germany, Oct. 16, 2020; English translation:**

<https://www.tagesspiegel.de/gesellschaft/panorama/der-extreme-sommer-kaliforniens-wie-us-landarbeiter-unter-waldbraenden-und-corona-leiden/26271826.html>

**The extreme summer of California: How U.S. farm workers suffer from forest fires and corona**

***By Judith Langowski***

The California farm workers are considered systemically important. Nevertheless, many do not have a work permit or insurance. How did they experience the forest fires?

In 2020, California will not only experience the corona pandemic but also an extreme forest fire season.

The Central Valley runs right through California. More than 600 kilometers long, a hot and dry valley. In summer, temperatures climb over 50 degrees Celsius in some places. Drought, air pollution and smoke that drifts into the valley from forest fires characterize the agricultural region.

800,000 farm workers, mostly Latinos, harvest two-thirds of the United States’ fruit and nut crop and one-third of all vegetable production here. Since the beginning of the pandemic in March, they have been regarded as “essential workers.” An estimated 60 percent of them do not have a residence or work permit.

Four of the five most Covid-affected counties in California are in the Central Valley. A July study by the University of California at Los Angeles found that the chance of dying from complications from Covid disease is five times higher for a Latino in California than a white person.

Because despite their "systemic relevance,” many of them have neither health insurance nor access to good medical care.

Bruce Rominger lives in the north of the Central Valley, about an hour from the state capital of Sacramento. In the fifth generation, he and his brother run a farm near the small town of Winters. They employ around 30 farm workers. Rominger's ancestors emigrated from Swabia, back in the days of the Gold Rush.

500 kilometers further south, in Kern County, Elizabeth Martimes is organizing medical aid for the farm workers. 20 percent of the residents live below the poverty line, and over half of the population are Latinos.

As a representative of the Lideres Campesinas organization, Martimes goes to the fields with medical assistance to carry out tests on site and to hand out masks.

From the middle of the valley, California Assemblyman Robert Rivas represents the interests of the rural population - farm workers and landowners.

In 2018, Rivas was elected to the California State Assembly for the county around the agricultural towns of Hollister and Salinas. There, just over an hour from Silicon Valley, lived “over 100,000 agricultural workers,” says Rivas, himself the grandson of farm workers.

More than 16,000 dead from the pandemic

So far, 860,000 people have contracted the virus in California alone. More than 16,600 have died as a result of the disease since March.

The 2020 forest fire season was already the most devastating in the state's recent history: More than 360 fires destroyed more than 1.6 million hectares of land, and the cost is estimated at over 1.6 billion dollars.

So Martimes, Rominger and Rivas have had an extreme summer. In Zoom conversations, they tell how they experienced the events.

Bruce Rominger was lucky: the forest fires north of his farm stopped a mile from his irrigated tomato fields and almond plantations thanks to a natural border.

Nevertheless: "The smoke is really not good for your health," says Rominger. His employees wore N95 protective masks in the fields, the harvest continued. But there was one advantage, says Rominger: The temperatures of more than 40 degrees, which lasted for weeks, were mitigated by the fact that smoke covered the sun.

Everyone on his farm has been wearing masks since the pandemic began. He wishes that had happened elsewhere too. Many people don't understand how relevant agriculture is to the US: "The most basic industry we have," says Rominger.

"Agriculture is our elixir of life," says Assemblyman Rivas. The consequences of the pandemic are particularly noticeable economically in his constituency: schools and restaurants have been closed nationwide, and the demand for vegetables and fruit has fallen sharply.

It also meant less work for farm workers. According to a study by NGOs and researchers from the University of California, half of the workers surveyed had lost income in the spring.

Bad conditions exacerbated

Elizabeth Martimes reports that many farm workers did not dare to report a possible Covid illness at work. “They're scared about their residence status,” she says.