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Washington State Exonerates Sarbanand Farms in Worker Fatality

RESPONSE FROM SARBANAND FARMS TO STATE INVESTIGATIONS

A Washington state investigation into the death last summer of a field worker at the blueberry farm of Sarbanand Farms, LLC, in Sumas, Wash., has exonerated the company of any culpability in the fatality.

The Department of Labor and Industries issued a finding of “no proposed violations” in the death of Honesto Silva Ibarra in a report released to the company today. Mr. Ibarra became ill last summer while employed at the farm and later passed away at a Seattle hospital of natural causes.

“We are relieved and reassured that state investigators concluded what we have known all along — that Mr. Ibarra’s death, while tragic, was not the result of the company’s actions or policies,” according to a Sarbanand spokesperson.

While the findings are subject to further review, state investigators said they expect their recommendations to be upheld.

“We are glad to have this matter behind us so we can begin to focus on this year’s harvest,” the spokesperson said.

Separately, state investigators fined the company \$73,000 for what they said were meal and work break infractions in July at the farm. The matter has been referred to the Whatcom County District Court, which can assess the company an additional fee equal to 105% of the fine for court and administrative costs. The company may request a hearing with the court to further review the findings. At this time, the company is reviewing its legal options and has not determined next steps.

State investigators praised Sarbanand’s cooperation and said, as a result, it drastically reduced the fines it could have imposed.

According to the state’s official statement, “investigators spent three days at the worksite looking into the availability of drinking water, shade, training and restroom facilities. The agency also conducted a third investigation focused solely on pesticide use and exposure to workers. Based on the information gathered during the inspections, no workplace safety or health violations were found.”

Sarbanand acquired the Sumas blueberry farm in 2011 and since then has made multimillion dollar improvements to property with new worker housing, dining and recreational facilities.

Sarbanand Farms' management takes seriously their responsibilities with respect to worker safety and are committed to the wellbeing of every one of their workers. There are comprehensive compliance programs in place to comply with all laws and regulations governing the workplace.

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