

# 20 salad workers hospitalized in chemical spill

Natalie Jacewicz 4:59 p.m. PDT October 19, 2015



(Photo: GANNETT)

A toxic stew of chemicals spilled at a Taylor Farms processing plant last week, sending 20 workers to the hospital with symptoms ranging from nosebleeds to vomiting and fainting.

A worker called emergency services to report the Oct. 15 spill at the plant in Tracy, California.

When employees arrived at work, they reported “a strong smell of chlorine,” according to worker Guadalupe Leon, who was quoted in a release by the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. But Leon’s crew leader told him to put on a mask and continue working, he claims. He said he later grew faint and went to the hospital.

The hospitalized patients included two pregnant women, according to the Teamsters, a group aiding the workers’ efforts to unionize since 2014.

Doug Bloch of Teamsters Council 7 says all of the workers returned to work the following day, except for one pregnant woman, who took unpaid leave.

According to coverage in the Tracy Press, fire department division chief Andrew Kellogg attributed the spill to mixing two potent cleaning chemicals: acetic acid and chlorine. ([http://www.goldenstatenewspapers.com/tracy\\_press/news/hazmat-accident-closes-valpico-road/article\\_fe861cf2-7348-11e5-9594-4f8e62b2ef54.html](http://www.goldenstatenewspapers.com/tracy_press/news/hazmat-accident-closes-valpico-road/article_fe861cf2-7348-11e5-9594-4f8e62b2ef54.html) ([http://www.goldenstatenewspapers.com/tracy\\_press/news/hazmat-accident-closes-valpico-road/article\\_fe861cf2-7348-11e5-9594-4f8e62b2ef54.html](http://www.goldenstatenewspapers.com/tracy_press/news/hazmat-accident-closes-valpico-road/article_fe861cf2-7348-11e5-9594-4f8e62b2ef54.html)))

Officials with Taylor Farms did not return messages requesting comment.

In 2012, a chemical spill at the same location also sent approximately 20 workers to the hospital.

“It’s déjà vu,” said Bloch of the latest incident.

Public records from California’s Division of Occupational Safety and Health — better known as Cal/OSHA — show Taylor Farms was fined \$1,685 for the 2012 incident. The inspection detail cites workers’ “eye and breathing irritation” after exposure to cleaning chemicals. The citation further notes that after the incident, the “employer mechanized the process to prevent future chemical releases.”

The citation does not note any follow-up inspections by Cal/OSHA, but Julia Bernstein, a press officer of the California Department of Industrial Relations, said citations seldom explicitly mention follow-up. Unannounced follow-up inspections can lead to more accurate progress assessments, she said.

Taylor Farms workers cataloged concerns in a 2014 formal complaint to Cal/OSHA. Among other issues, the complaint highlighted overexposure to chlorine used for cleaning equipment and floors. Workers blamed chlorine for frequent nosebleeds and batches of bloodied lettuce weeded out by quality control.

As a member of Cal/OSHA’s advisory committee, Bloch claims that the organization knows about Taylor Farms’ violations, but lacks resources to address them all.

“Cal/OSHA has been very aggressive and knows that Taylor Farms is a bad actor in Tracy. But they don’t have enough enforcement ability,” he said.

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