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Our 21st century challenge: farmers, workers and scholars

*Excerpts from Don Villarejo's
June 8 keynote address*

“The challenge before us is to think long and hard about how we, as intellectuals committed to making workplaces safer, can also meaningfully engage with the communities we hope to serve. In my view, the dangerously increased separation of the academic community from the majority of the people of California can and will be overcome by our response to this challenge,” said Don Villarejo to attendees of the 20th Anniversary Celebration of the Western Center for Agricultural Health and Safety on July 8.

Upon congratulating Director Marc Schenker and all of his colleagues for their efforts over the past 20 years to improve the health and safety of agricultural workers, Villarejo also commended NIOSH for its humanitarian programs throughout the nation.

He explained his use of the term agricultural workers as “everyone who does farm work: self-employed workers (farmers), unpaid family workers (usually spouses or kids), hired workers (both directly hired and those who work for labor market intermediaries), and agricultural service workers.



The WCAHS 20th Anniversary Reception opened with words of welcome by Clare Hasler (above), executive director of the Robert Mondavi Institute for Wine and Food Science.

In short, anyone who gets dirt on their work shoes while doing farm work.”

and the obsession with private markets has, during the past three decades, undermined the idea that collective action – the commons – can address or help solve problems we face together.

Villarejo believes that one of the great challenges of our time is responding to the increasing separation of the community of intellectuals – “people like us – from the very large number of this nation’s people who feel alienated from or, perhaps, ignored by centers of learning. Populist advocates repeatedly claim that our government has been hijacked by ...Ivy League elitists...”

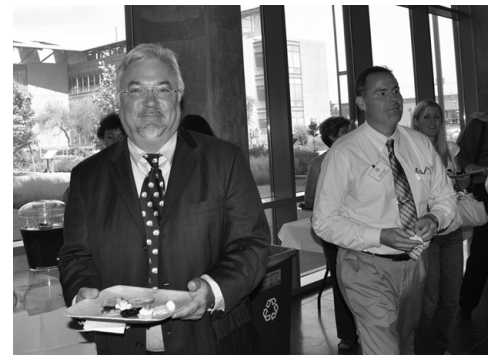


From left, Michael O'Malley, medical director of occupational health services; John Balmes, professor of medicine at UCSF, professor of environmental health sciences at UC Berkeley, and member of the California Air Resources Board; Marc Schenker, WCAHS director; and Don Villarejo, founding director of the California Institute for Rural Studies and long-time supporter of WCAHS, celebrate the center's 20 years of research and community outreach.

The work done by NIOSH through its programs has been made more difficult in these times, not simply because of the fiscal crisis of federal and state governments, but also because action by publicly-funded agencies has been under relentless attack for more than 30 years. Tony Judt pointed out in his recent book, *Ill Fares the Land*, that deregulation, erosion of support for government,

Crediting those early lessons learned from community engagement, working with non-profit organizations, academics, local and state legislators and industry, Villarejo believes that “the challenge before us is to think long and hard about how we, as intellectuals committed to making workplaces safer, can also meaningfully engage with the communities we hope to serve.” He added, “in my view, the dangerously increased separation of the academic community from the majority of the people of California can and will be overcome by our response to this challenge.”

Photos from the 20th Anniversary celebration of the Ag Center



Celebrating 20 years of the WCAHS – Congratulations!

By *Guadalupe (Lupe) Sandoval*

It should come as no surprise to readers that agriculture continues to be among our nation's most hazardous industries. Annual reports from the Bureau of Labor Statistics confirm what many of us who work in, or support this industry already know – the farmers and workers who strive to support their families

of produce and were exposed to farm chemicals.

In 1992, I was fortunate to become a part of the Western Center for Agricultural Health and Safety (WCAHS) known then as the Agricultural Health and Safety Center at Davis. For three and one-half years, I was part of an outreach group working with Patrick Marer O'Conner on pesticide safety education



After his address, Guadalupe (Lupe) Sandoval, managing director, California Farm Labor Contractor Association, and member of WCAHS External Advisory Board, speaks with Kate Snow.

while putting food on our tables are at significant risk.

I recall my own experiences, back in the 1960s and into the 1970s, working the fields of the Central Valley alongside my immigrant parents, four brothers and two of my sisters. We discovered there are a great many hazards in harvest activities, whether it's cherries, apricots, tomatoes, grapes or boysenberries we were working. It was hot, heavy, strenuous work. We worked with untrained tractor operators, rickety ladders, heavy containers

programs. These programs trained hundreds of trainers throughout the state. And those trainers went on to train many thousands of fieldworkers and pesticide handlers. It's difficult to tell how much impact those programs had, but statistics from the Department of Pesticide Regulation

indicate the number of reported pesticide illnesses have decreased more than 60 percent between 1992 and 2006.

Over the past few years, I've noticed a near total transition in our hand-harvested vineyards – from the old picking lugs that carried up to 75 pounds of grapes to the smaller lugs that hold up to 45 pounds of grapes. Many of these lugs are also modified with more comfortable handles made of PVC pipe. These changes were due in large part to the ergonomic field studies performed by James Meyers



and John Miles. Workers, both male and female, tell me of the huge decrease in the level of pain and strain they have, thanks to the smaller picking lugs and modified handles. Those harvest workers can go home in a less exhausted state and enjoy a restful evening with their families, rather than wonder if they can make it through another brutal day of picking grapes.

WCAHS will continue to make a difference in the lives of farmers and farmworkers. Today's research projects into

the hazards of agricultural work environments are tomorrow's applications of improved engineering, safer work practices and greater awareness needed to promote worker health and safety.

On behalf of the California Farm Labor Contractor Association, a new and growing association of farm labor contractors, we congratulate the WCAHS for 20 years of making a difference, and we look forward to the next 20 years of progress.



From left, UC Davis Dean Emeritus Charles Hess, Veterinary Medicine Dean Bennie Osburn, and Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor Enrique Lavernia.



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WCAHS hosts heat illness prevention workshops in July

On July 22, Education/Outreach Specialist Teresa Andrews trained 24 people at the Western Center for Agricultural Health and Safety in Davis. Participants represented diverse community-based agencies and included individual community organizers.

Training material was provided in English, Spanish, Punjabi

and Hmong, and included graphics for non-readers. After an overview of the Cal/OSHA campaign, which includes billboards, posters, laminated fact sheets, radio broadcasts and educational DVDs, participants were instructed on the use of the material and effective distribution methods. They practiced in breakout groups and created their individual outreach plans.

WCAHS also conducted workshops in Mendota and Modesto, and similar workshops were conducted throughout the state by campaign partners at UC Berkeley and UC Los Angeles. For more information and training material, contact WCAHS at 530-752-4050, or visit www.99calor.org/english.html



WCAHS Education/Outreach Specialist Teresa Andrews (standing) conducted a Train-the-Trainer workshop in July as part of the 2010 Cal/OSHA Heat Illness Prevention Campaign for outdoor workers.

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