

Jump in farm deaths fuels push to expand workplace laws

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Deaths on Alberta farms jumped 58 per cent last year and involved six children, including two who were mistakenly buried and suffocated in mounds of grain, Alberta Agriculture reported.

The spike in farm-related fatalities marks a return to a grim normal, after 2007 deaths declined to a dozen from the provincial average of 19.

Nearly all of the 19 people who died on the farm in 2008 were men or boys -- their deaths adding to a 26-year high for other work-related fatalities, which climbed to 166 last year.

The farm deaths escalation is adding fuel to a growing push to expand Alberta's workplace laws to include farm employees.

The NDP and two labour unions joined forces at the legislature Thursday to call on the Stelmach government to rewrite its safety legislation, a recommendation that stems from a provincial judge's review of the June 2006 death of Kevan Chandler at a feedlot near High River.

This change, the judge suggested, could enhance monitoring and enforcement of safety in the agriculture industry, the province's second-largest.

"One farm fatality is too much. If the legislation was in place when my husband was alive, he would still be here," Lorna Chandler said Thursday.

Employment and Immigration Minister Hector Goudreau said he's concerned about last year's rise of on-the-farm deaths, but he isn't certain redrafting provincial legislation would prevent these tragedies.

Farms have been exempted from the Occupational Health and Safety Act since 1977, which means the vast majority of agricultural employees don't qualify for Workers' Compensation Benefits and fatalities aren't scrutinized as stringently as other workplace deaths.

Laurel Aitken, a provincial farm safety co-ordinator with Alberta Agriculture, said the department relies on the medical examiner to relay details of fatalities and on hospitals to voluntarily collect information on injured farm workers.

Goudreau said he and Agriculture Minister George Groeneveld are examining the Chandler fatality review.

"We're certainly looking at the recommendations, and we're seeing how that might impact all of our farms," he said. "We're sort of saying how can we do things differently in the future, yet respecting the individuality of individual farms out there."

Premier Ed Stelmach, a former farmer, said the province will collaborate with the agriculture industry to see what more can be done to address safety.

He said most feedlots and other farming operations already have strict guidelines in place to protect workers.

"The operation can't lose people to (an) accident because it reflects on the operation itself," Stelmach told reporters in Edmonton. "But I'm looking forward to the good discussion and then come back and see what we can do."
