



Hazard Alert

Topic Summary:

Fatal Hazard – Transporting passengers in unsafe vehicles

Are you in the Specialty Forest-Products Industry? If so, please take time to read this important information and share it with workers, farm labor contractors and others in your industry.

- In March 2004, a van carrying ten people collided with another vehicle. Four people were thrown from the van on impact. The van driver and four passengers subsequently died. The remaining five passengers were seriously injured and may never fully recover. According to the Washington State Patrol, the victims were on their way to pick salal or bear grass, forest products that are sold to the floral industry. The van driver was wearing a seat belt, but the State Patrol concluded that the passengers were not secured in the van and that one seat was not bolted to the vehicle.

It is common practice for groups of brush pickers to travel together in vehicles that either are not equipped for the number of passengers or have been modified to haul more forest products. The pickers may ride unsecured in an empty vehicle to the work site. When the vehicle is full, they ride on top of the forest products or crowded into small spaces behind the driver's seat.



This photograph was taken during a field investigation in 2003. There were 13 people in the van, including the driver. They were wedged in behind the front seats or squeezed into small spaces throughout the back of the van.

Why is there a problem?

When the vehicles (typically vans) are modified for carrying large amounts of brush, they may no longer be safe for the passengers. Serious hazards include insufficient seating, lack of seat belts, and transporting unsecured sharp objects such as knives and machetes.

State motor-vehicle laws prohibit transporting passengers in vehicles that are not equipped with properly secured seats and seat belts. Worker-protection laws require that vehicles used for transporting workers be properly equipped and safely operated and maintained. The driver also could be held responsible in a lawsuit in the event of an accident, if the required equipment is not available or not used by passengers.

What do I need to know?

The key precautions in protecting passengers are to:

- Require that all company or personal vehicles used to transport personnel meet the safety requirements of the state motor-vehicle and worker-safety laws.
- Ensure that vehicles are equipped with a sufficient number of properly secured seats and seat belts and that all passengers use seat belts. Safety and vehicle maintenance must be addressed in the employer's accident-prevention plan.
- Train workers on vehicle-safety requirements, procedures and seat-belt use.
- Secure sharp objects such as knives and machetes so that they are not loose in the vehicle.

Online Resources

- WISHA* Safety Standards for Agriculture, Vehicle and Farm Equipment: www.LNI.wa.gov/wisha/rules/agriculture/html/part-e.htm
- Washington State Patrol Motor Vehicle Safety law: www.leg.wa.gov/rcw/index.cfm?fuseaction=title&title=46
- Other WISHA Safety and Health rules may apply: www.LNI.wa.gov
- L&I Video Library: www.LNI.wa.gov/Safety/TrainTools/Videos/Library

How can I get help from Labor and Industries?

L&I staff provide consultations, training, and technical assistance at no cost to employers. Please contact Marcia Holt, Farm Labor Contractor Project Supervisor at (360) 902-4716 or holt235@LNI.wa.gov for information on L&I services. Spanish speaking representatives are available.

*WISHA, or the Washington Industrial Safety and Health Act, is the state equivalent of OSHA.