

ARMANDO & HELADIO RAMIREZ

With No Protection, Brothers Die from Composting Gas

On October 12, 2011, 16-year-old Armando Ramirez and his 22-year-old brother Heladio were cleaning out a storm water drain at work. Heladio saw his little brother collapse and went down the eight-foot hole into the drain to save him. Both died.

The brothers worked at the Community Recycling & Resource Recovery facility at Lamont, near Bakersfield. The site composts organic waste matter. Their deaths were caused by hydrogen sulfide gas that accumulated inside the drain. The toxic and odorless gas is released as waste decomposes. Inhaled, it quickly attacks the central nervous and respiratory systems, causing people to pass out and, often, to die.



According to family members, the only protective equipment offered to the young men were thin “painters’ masks;” they do not work for hydrogen sulfide.

Armando and Heladio came to the United States from Oaxaca, Mexico, just two years ago. Family members say Armando was too young to get a job as a farmworker alongside his mother, Faustina. Yet, he was hired in the dangerous waste industry with his brother.

The brothers died at a composting facility that received 400 tons of green waste a day from Los Angeles. For years, it was known for breaking laws. There were land-use violations, trash complaints, and, after the brothers’ deaths, a Kern County order to cease operations and pay a \$2.3 million fine. In February 2012, a judge allowed the site to stay open while the company fights the order.

On March 21, 2012, Cal/OSHA issued 16 citations and fines of \$166,890 to the company. There was a separate general citation to Heladio’s employer, A&B Harvesting, a day labor contractor. Criminal charges may follow.

The horrific tragedy is not really a surprise for the Don’t Waste LA campaign. “The region’s private waste industry operates, by and large, with no accountability. Consequently, it’s an industry notorious for mistreating workers,” says Greg Good, of LAANE and director of the campaign. “Regulations and standards exist—but because there’s so little governmental capacity to enforce those standards, it effectively operates outside the law.”

Nor was it a surprise to the union representing the drivers who truck the organic waste to the facility and take the 1,200 tons of compost away each day. The Teamsters are doing outreach to “shine light” on the conditions at the site, and negotiating with the company about organizing the inside workers, says Doug Bloch, Political Director for the Teamsters Joint Council 7.

Source: Don’t Waste LA. Don’t Waste LA is a coalition of community, environmental, faith, and labor organizations working for clean air, green jobs and recycling for all Angelenos, through region-wide standards and accountability in the city’s commercial and multi-family waste and recycling system.