

# Mexican citizens were traveling to work at a Florida farm when a pickup hit their bus, killing 8

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**Online Desk:** Mexican citizens were among those going to work at a Florida watermelon farm on Tuesday when the bus they were traveling in was sideswiped and crashed, killing eight people, officials said.

Alicia Bárcena, Mexico's foreign relations secretary, on Tuesday said via the social media platform X that she was sorry to report that a tragic automotive accident had happened in Florida with Mexican agricultural workers involved. She didn't say how many of the more than four dozen people on board were from Mexico.

The Mexican consulate in Orlando was working to find out more and provide support, according to a post on X. The Florida Highway Patrol said names of the people who died would be released after relatives were notified.

The Florida Highway Patrol arrested the driver of a pickup truck that crashed into the farmworker bus. Troopers said Bryan Maclean Howard, 41, faces eight counts of driving-under-the-influence-manslaughter for Tuesday morning's crash. No further details were released, including what substance allegedly left Howard impaired.

It wasn't immediately known if Howard has an attorney to comment on his behalf. Attempts to reach Howard were unsuccessful Tuesday. State records show he has previous arrests for alleged driving with a suspended license, leaving the scene of an accident and marijuana possession.

Troopers say Howard was driving a 2001 Ford Ranger that crossed into the center line on State Road 40, a two-lane road that passes through horse farms. The truck sideswiped the bus, causing it to veer off the road at about 6:40 a.m. It plowed through a fence and into a tree and then rolled. In addition to the eight killed, at least 40 were injured.

The accident happened about 80 miles (130 kilometers) north of Orlando as the workers were going to Cannon Farms in Dunnellon. The bus ended up on its side, with its windows smashed and its emergency rear door and top hatch open. The truck came to a stop at the side of the road, with its air bag blown and extensive damage to the driver's side.

Andres Sequera, a director of mission and ministry for AdventHealth hospitals, told reporters that the injured workers who could be visited by chaplains "were in good spirits for what they have been through."

"We were able to provide support, presence, prayer when it was asked of us," he said.

No one answered the phone at Olvera Trucking on Tuesday afternoon. The company recently advertised for a temporary driver who would bus workers to watermelon fields and then operate harvesting equipment. The pay was \$14.77 an hour.

A Labor Department document shows Olvera recently applied for 43 H-2A workers to harvest watermelons at Cannon Farms this month. The company again offered a base rate of \$14.77 an hour, with promises of housing and transportation to and from the fields.

The H-2A program allows U.S. employers or agents who meet certain regulatory requirements to bring foreign nationals into the country to fill temporary agricultural jobs. Florida farms employ more H-2A workers than any other state, about 50,000 a year, according to the Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association.

“Thank you to all who have reached out and offered condolences, help and prayers” for the families and loved ones involved in the crash, Cannon Farms posted on its Facebook page, adding that the family-owned operation would stay closed through Wednesday.

Cannon Farms grows peanuts and watermelons, which it sends to grocery stores across the U.S. and Canada.

Federal statistics show that vehicle crashes were the leading cause of job-related deaths among farmworkers in 2022, the latest year available. They accounted for 81 of 171 fatalities. It was not immediately known if the bus had seat belts.

Authorities in several states have been pushing for greater regulations for the safety of farmworkers, who are overwhelmingly migrants.

The Labor Department announced new seat belt requirements for employer vehicles used for farmworkers on temporary visas, among other worker protections that take effect June 28. The Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association has been opposed, calling the seat belt requirement “impractical.”

State law requires seat belts for farmworker transport using smaller vehicles, weighing less than 10,000 pounds.

A GoFundMe campaign organized by the Farmworker Association of Florida to support accident victims and their families had raised about \$20,000 of a \$50,000 goal by Tuesday night.

“Farmworkers tend to be forgotten, but it’s important not to forget farmworkers, especially during such difficult times,” the post said.

Two groups that advocate for farmworkers issued statements calling for stricter laws to protect them from harm.

“It is too easy to dismiss this as just another accident,” said Asia Clermont, Florida director for the League of United Latin American Citizens. “Florida must take every possible step to protect its essential workers, who are human beings and the backbone of the state’s economy.”

Ty Joplin of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers said transportation laws for farmworkers are often unenforced.

“While accidents will happen, protecting workers while transporting them with mandatory and enforceable safety provisions, like seat belts and safety inspections, can reduce injuries and deaths,” he said.