

## Ag debates health-care reform

*Doctor says farmers face continued threats to health*

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Thousands of people marched through Seattle on May 30 in a parade calling on Congress to enact health-care reform.

As thousands of people, many carrying signs and banners calling for health-care reform, made their way along a parade route through Seattle on Saturday, May 30, agriculture surfaced as one of the industries that would benefit from an overhaul of a system many see as broken.

Statistics tell the story. In an interview with Capital Press, Dr. Marc Schenker, director of the Western Center for Agricultural Health and Safety at the University of California-Davis, said that not only is farming one of the most dangerous occupations, it has also failed to make the substantial safety improvements that other high-risk industries such as construction, transportation and mining have made over the past 50 years.

Pointing out that safety risks go beyond tractor rollovers and other equipment-related accidents, Schenker said today's farmers and farmworkers face problems that include respiratory disease and pesticide exposure.

He said 70 percent of farmworkers have no health insurance.

A 2008 survey by The Access Project that focused on 1,700 California family farmers and ranchers found that despite high rates of insurance coverage, farm and ranch families spent, on average, more than \$8,500 on health care premiums and other out-of-pocket expenses annually. In addition, more than 10 percent of those families had debt resulting from medical or dental bills.

In Washington state, farmers can get insurance through the Farm Bureau or other associations.

Nevertheless, Patrick Connor, national affairs director with the Washington State Farm Bureau, said that statewide statistics from 2004 show 33 percent of the uninsured are self-employed.

"There are probably a lot of farmers in that category," Connor said.

Marcy Ostrom, director of Washington State University's Small Farms Program, has found that health coverage is a "huge issue" for the farmers she works with.

"Frequently, one member of a farming couple is forced to work off the farm in order to obtain health insurance for the family even though their labor and knowledge are sorely needed on the farm," she said.