

Farm cited in worker's death

Matsche Farms agrees to pay \$25K

By Scott Williams

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Matsche Farms Inc., one of Shawano County's largest dairy farms, has been cited and fined for workplace safety violations in connection with a worker's death last summer.

The federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration found that Matsche Farms failed to protect worker Reyes Hernandez Flores from hazards when he was lowered into a storage tank and died from asphyxiation.

OSHA also found several other problems and fined Matsche



REYES
HERNANDEZ
FLORES

Farms a combined \$25,000 for violating federal workplace safety rules at the dairy farm near Birnamwood.

Farm spokeswoman Heather Matsche said the family-owned business would not dispute OSHA's findings and has taken steps to correct problems cited by the federal investigators.

Matsche also called Flores' death a tragedy, describing him as a dedicated employee and close friend.

"We consider all of our employees to be a part of our extended family," she said in a statement.

"Their safety has always been and will continue to be our top priority."

Located on River Road in the town of Almon, Matsche Farms maintains a herd of about 5,000 dairy cows and has recently undertaken an expansion that could add another 4,000 cows, making it one of the Wisconsin's largest such operations.

On the afternoon of Aug. 14, Flores was lowered on a rope into an 8,000-gallon tank that was partially filled with "whey," a liquid product used in feed for cows. While attempting to unclog a drain at the bottom of the tank, Flores became asphyxiated and died.

Shawano County Coroner Brian Westfahl said the 12-foot-tall vertical tank had one opening near

the top about the size of a manhole cover. Westfahl said the combination of hot summer weather and the contents inside the tank contributed to suffocating conditions, leaving Flores virtually no oxygen.

"It was poor decision-making as a whole," Westfahl said.

After an autopsy and investigation, the coroner ruled the death an accidental case of asphyxiation.

According to an obituary, Flores, 32, lived in the Birnamwood area with his wife, Amber, and had worked at Matsche Farms for 15 years.

OSHA investigators spent several months reviewing his death and concluded that Matsche Farms "did not furnish employ-

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