

Dole working to slash workers' comp costs

If you want to know how to navigate the workers' compensation insurance system, ask Art Sanchez.

As employee relations administrator at Dole Dried Fruit and Nut in Thermal, part of Sanchez' job is to educate employees about their rights under the 80-year-old state program designed to pay workers with job-related injuries or illnesses.

In addition to assisting employees who have filed workers' comp claims — he does everything from driving them to the doctor to translating documents — Sanchez or other Dole representatives accompany employees to depositions and other legal proceedings.

"We want to show our employees that we're in this together, that it's not a situation of conflict, but a situation of cooperation," said Sanchez, who also teaches classes to other businesses on changing their approach to workers' comp claims.

His efforts are part of a four-year-old company program aimed at cutting workers' comp costs, said Dan Zahlis, risk manager for the Dried Fruit and Nut division.

Although a 1992 study found that only about 20 percent of the workers' comp claims submitted to the Fresno County part of the division were clearly fraudulent or very questionable, Sanchez said those cases ate up 75 percent of the workers' comp costs.

Although the number of claims usually climbs when employers un-

dertake a cooperative approach to workers' comp, the number of costly fraudulent claims falls, Zahlis said.

After the first year of the new program, the Thermal facility cut its workers' comp costs from \$385,000 to \$30,000, Sanchez said.

To speed up claims processing and help protect the rights of injured workers with legitimate claims, Dole Dried Fruit and Nut:

- Waives the three-day waiting period before employees start receiving workers' comp benefits for temporary total disability.

- Allows employees to go to any doctor during the first 30 days after their injury or illness occurs.

- Aggressively investigates and documents cases of suspected fraud.

Last month, after Dole Dried Fruit and Nut cooperated on an investigation with the Riverside County district attorney's office, an employee pleaded guilty to filing a fraudulent claim and was sentenced to jail time and probation.

- Sues attorneys who file frivolous or unfounded workers' comp lawsuits — a felony under state workers' comp laws — on behalf of Dole employees.

As Zahlis sees it, workers' comp is designed to put employers and employees into an adversarial position against the system — and the onus is on employers to change that.

"We need to drive conflict out of the system and employers have 100 percent total control over that. We

Dole Dried Fruit and Nut

A division of Dole Food Co. Inc., which is headquartered in Westlake Village, Dole Dried Fruit and Nut processes dates, raisins and nuts at a Thermal facility that employs 150 people and at three other plants in California.

Dole Food employs about 51,000 workers worldwide. On Feb. 5, Dole Food reported earnings of \$5.3 million, or 9 cents a share for its fiscal fourth quarter, compared to a loss of \$2.6 million or 4 cents per share for the same quarter a year earlier.

Where to call

For more information or to report suspected workers' compensation insurance fraud, call the **California Department of Insurance Consumer Hotline, (800) 927-4357.**

need to communicate to employees that the system is there to protect them. It's an entitlement. You don't need to hire an attorney to get your rights."

But Zahlis realizes that not all employers hold that view. "Some are very resistant to operating any way other than in the traditional, conflict-based corporate style."

And Dole has an advantage over employers that buy workers' comp coverage from outside insurance companies, Zahlis said. "We're self-insured. We have more control."