Imagine having a job that requires you to work bent in half. That requires you to move swiftly between narrow rows of plants, constantly stooping to ground level to snatch up a weed with your bare hands – then another and another, scarcely pausing to straighten. And doing it for hours at a time.

Many thousands of farm workers across the country do have such jobs. Which is why many have the serious hack ailments that are among the worst of the health and safety problems that make harvesting our food one of the most dangerous of all occupations.

The growers who impose such primitive working conditions claim that's the way it has to be. They say allowing workers to stand upright and use long-handled hoes for the essential task of weeding would increase crop damage, decrease production, and require more use of hazardous weed-killing pesticides. But above all, they worry that it might lower their profits.

Those who put the welfare of workers first have other concerns. They are demanding that government authorities protect farm workers by banning hand weeding, starting in California, the nation's leading agriculture state.

We're trying to get at what fundamentally is a human-rights abuse . . . There is an alternative tool that is safe and available, but workers are not permitted to use it," says Mark Schacht of California Rural Legal Assistance.

His organization, a longtime advocate for farm workers, has joined with the United Farm Workers Union and the AFL-CIO's California Labor Federation to petition the state's Occupational Safety and Health agency – OSHA – for a ban. They want growers to provide workers with hoes at least four feet long to do the work now done by hand. Those who failed to do so would face fines of at least $500 per worker for each violation.

The petitioners base part of their argument on a memorandum from OSHA's medical unit that said hand weeding "constitutes a continuing threat to the health and well-being" of workers.

Similar findings led California officials to ban use of the once widely used short-handled hoe in 1975. They cited physicians' reports of workers who suffered ruptured spinal disks, arthritis of the spine and other often irreparable injuries because they were forced to use what the UFW called "this despised
tool” – known unaffectionately among workers as "El Cortito." Yet 28 years later, farm worker advocates are still waging a struggle to shield workers from debilitating back injuries. As OSHA's medical unit reported, workers today face the "same unsafe conditions that the short-hoe legislation attempted to rectify."

Hand-weeding actually is even harder on workers than using short-handled hoes, for it requires them to bend down up to one foot more in order to reach the ground. Many growers turned to hand weeding after the hoe ban went into effect, even though using longer hoes can do the job without harming workers.

OSHA has appointed an advisory board of union, grower, agency and academic representatives that's been deliberating on whether to recommend action by the agency.

Whatever the result, farm worker advocates are likely to follow up with an attempt to get the State Legislature to enact a ban. They attempted that in 1995 and again last year, only to be blocked by California’s powerful agricultural lobby.

But this time they will have, if not the backing of the state's Occupational Safety and Health agency, then certainly much new evidence of the compelling need to finally end the barbarous practice that has done such great harm to some of our most exploited and valuable workers.